

# Tears & Tributes



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ANJUMAN-E CHIN...

## Preface

THE new moon of the month of Muharram heralds the New Year of the Islamic year. It is customary for all nations to celebrate their New Year with feasting and rejoicing but, in contrast, all Islamic countries, instead of celebrating their New Year with revelries and merry-making, go into mourning. The New Year is not ushered in with the ringing of bells, display of flags and buntings and dances of belles but by singing of dirges and beating of breasts. A person who is not familiar with Islam and its chequered history, is at times puzzled and perplexed at what he beholds and, out of curiosity, asks for the reasons for the heart-rending scenes he sees. When he is told that the mourning is for the martyrs of Karbala, who laid down their lives for the cause of truth, more than thirteen hundred years ago, he naturally wants to know who the martyrs were and how their sacrifices and sufferings evoke such emotions and stir the hearts of Muslims in spite of the lapse of centuries.

History of mankind is replete with instances of great souls and saintly persons laying down their lives for the sake of ideals they cherished, for the sake of causes they espoused, for principles they upheld. Such noble examples are recalled and remembered but very seldom mourned like the tragedy of Karbala. To understand the real significance of this great carnage, and its impact on Islamic history, it is necessary to study the annals of Islam from its inception. What led Imam Husain, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be on him) to sacrifice his all for the sake of truth and the principles of Islam, and what was the cause he was defending, can be understood only by an unbiased and dispassionate study of the chronicles of those times. Then only it can be appreciated that it was not a family feud culminating in a massacre but a fight by Imam Husain, son of Maula Ali, and grandson of the Prophet (Peace be on him), and his devoted followers, who suffered untold hardships and laid down their lives for the sake of principles inculcated by Islam, for the defence of ideals and beliefs which they considered

cannot be determined by the immediate results of a battle or war but by the long-term repercussions of the clash of their ideologies on the course of events and influence on the minds of men.

The happenings on that fateful 10th day of Muharram of 61 A.H. and their aftermath were so soul-stirring that they have left an indelible impression on the minds of millions of Muslims who recall them with the deepest feelings and emotions. The sufferings of Imam Husain and those with him, who participated in those events, defy description and it is not possible to do any justice to the theme. This is just a brief attempt at recollection of the events of the day and the happenings thereafter. If the interest of those who read it is aroused to find out for themselves, by reference to the history of Islam, the causes that led to the sacrifice, the purpose will be achieved. To others who know the significance of the martyrdom of Imam Husain, and its impact on the course of Islamic history, this work will appear as what it is intended to be—a tribute in tears.

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IN-drop silence prevailed in the mosque at Kufa where a large congregation had gathered to offer evening prayers led by Muslim. Outside the mosque the town-crier was reading out the proclamation. Every one of the congregation was straining his ears to listen to every word with rapt attention.

At the top of his voice the town-crier was shouting: "Be it known to the people of Kufa that Obeidullah, son of Ziad, has assumed the governorship of Kufa under the orders of the Khalif. He has noted with perturbation that the people of Kufa have extended their welcome to Muslim, son of Aqil, who has come from Medina as an emissary of Husain, son of Ali, who has declined to owe allegiance to the Khalif. It is hereby proclaimed for the information of all the citizens of Kufa that any person found associating with Muslim, son of Aqil, will be considered a rebel against the Khalif and, by way of punishment, he will be hanged, drawn and quartered, his entire family will be put to the sword and his property confiscated. In case of those who have hitherto extended their welcome to him, if they now repent and desist from doing so, amnesty will be given."

With bated breath every one listened to the proclamation. A few exchanged enquiring glances with their friends. Some others whispered some words to their neighbours. At this moment the call for prayers was given and Muslim silently rose to lead the congregational prayers.

When Muslim completed the prayers and turned back, he found the mosque empty. Only one person was there. It was Haneef Ibne Orwah at whose house Muslim was staying as a guest. The two looked at each other. No words were needed to tell Muslim why the people of Kufa had deserted him. The people of Kufa, who had so persistently asked Husain to come over to them and take up the responsibilities of their spiritual amelioration had, on hearing the proclamation, got scared

out of their wits. These were the people who had in the past betrayed Muslim's uncle Ali, the Commander of the Faithful, and shown white feathers in times of trouble and tribulations. These were the people who had deserted Muslim's cousin, Hasan, son of Ali, in his hour of need.

Muslim stood for a while motionless. His face was full of anguish. He was not dismayed at the fate that awaited him, because a fighting death was the heritage of his family. He was only disconsolate at the thought that he had reposed confidence in these people's sincerity and written to his cousin, Husain, to come over to Kufa as their moral, mental and spiritual preceptor, to save them from sinking into the depths of moral degradation. How he wished he had not been hasty about judging these people!

A moment's reflection was sufficient to make up his mind. At least there was one man with him who could be relied upon by him. If he could only send a message to Husain through Haneer Ibne Orwah about the treachery of the people of Kufa! If he could send a warning to Husain about the betrayal and make him change his course!

With these thoughts Muslim turned towards Haneer. Before he could give expression to his thoughts, Haneer Ibne Orwah anticipated his words. In low whispers he said: "Muslim, my respected guest, I know what is uppermost in your mind. If God enables me to leave this cursed town in time, I shall rush post-haste to warn our master and Imam to turn back." He hung his head down and, in a tone which was hardly audible, added, as if muttering to himself: "Muslim, my duty towards you as your host demands that I should remain here to protect you and shed the last drop of my blood in your defence. But I know that you would like me to attend to the higher duty which we both owe to our Lord, Husain Ibne Ali. There is hardly any time to be lost and so I bid you farewell. May Almighty God protect you and your innocent sons from the fury of these treacherous fiends."

Haneer Ibne Orwah rushed out of the Mosque. He knew that he had to act quickly, if at all he was to succeed in his mission. Before leaving Kufa he had to do something for the safety of the two young sons of Muslim who had not yet reached their teens. He was quickly revolving in his mind how he could hide these innocent boys and where. He

could not think of anybody known to him who could be trusted to give shelter to them. He hardly had any time at his disposal to make arrangements because his paramount obligation was to convey Muslim's message to Imam Husain. His quick-working mind decided that the children of Muslim may be warned to get out of the house where they were no longer safe and leave the rest to God.

On reaching his house, Haneer asked his wife to whisk the children out of the house by the back door for their safety. He asked his servant to harness his horse as quickly as he could. Hardly Muhammad and Ibrahim, the young sons of Muslim, had been put on the road to face the world and its turmoils in a strange and unfriendly city, the house of Haneer was surrounded by armed troupers sent by Obeidullah. Haneer realised that the hope he had cherished to leave the town and carry the message of Muslim to Husain was completely frustrated. He unsheathed his sword and fell upon the hirelings of Obeidullah with the intention of selling his life as dearly as he could. The odds against him were too heavy. He was soon overpowered and chained and marched off to the court of the Governor.

\* \* \* \* \*

After Haneer's departure from the Mosque, Muslim reflected for a while. At first his mind was put at ease by Haneer's assurance that he would carry the warning to Husain about the happenings in Kufa. But on second thought he realised that there was every possibility of Haneer being captured before he could leave the town. What if that happened? He had fullest confidence in Haneer's sincerity, but how could he be so sure that Haneer would be able to make good his escape from Kufa? Although Muslim was fully alive to the lot that would befall his innocent sons on their capture, he realised that the right course for him was to find some other person whom he could trust to carry the message to the Imam. Kneeling down in prayers he muttered: "Merciful Allah, spare me for a while so that I can send the warning to my Imam."

He came out of the mosque slowly. He did not know which way to turn. He only knew that the whole town had turned hostile to him. As soon as he stepped out of the mosque, he saw groups of people collected hither and thither and engaged in animated conversation. On seeing him coming out they scattered and walked away as if they had never known

him. Muslim realised that they were, one and all, mortally afraid of the reprisals that would befall them if they stood by him. Now he saw how difficult it was for him to find a single person who could fulfil his purpose. But where to look for him; where to find him?

With a heavy heart Muslim was now trudging the narrow bye-lanes of Kufa. The sun was fast descending and the dark narrow lanes of Kufa becoming darker every moment. Making a hood of his gown, so as to cover his head to avoid identification Muslim was walking on and on, almost aimlessly ambling. The deserted cobbled pavements were echoing his foot-steps. The only other sound to be heard was of the horses' hoofs as the soldiers were patrolling the streets and searching for him in all nooks and corners. Whilst walking aimlessly he was furiously thinking how to find someone who could carry his message to Husain.

Soon darkness descended on the whole town. As curfew had been imposed by the orders of the Governor, not a soul was venturing out. It became evident to Muslim that, if he walked on, there was every possibility of his being arrested by the patrolmen and, if that happened, his last hope of finding a messenger would vanish. The events of the day had made him tired in body and soul. He decided to sit on the footsteps of a house and rest for a while. Perhaps he thought he could ask for a cup of water from some inmate of that house to quench his thirst.

He sat on the doorstep of a house, hesitating whether to knock at the door and ask for water. Whilst he was still wavering, he heard the opening of the door against which he was leaning. An old lady stood before him with a flickering candle in her hands. From her enquiring eyes he could understand that she was wondering why he was seated there. Muslim turned to her and requested her for a glass of water. She asked him to wait for a minute and, going into the house, returned with a tumbler of water. Muslim drank it to the last drop and thanked the lady profusely. He again sat down on the doorstep. The old lady looked at him for a while and then asked him: "My son, why do you not return to your house? Do you realise how your wife and children must be worrying about you by your remaining away from the house in such troubled atmosphere. Don't you have a house with wife and children?" A lump came into Muslim's throat with the recollection of his family and home. Controlling

his emotions and checking the tears which were gushing from his eyes he said: "Good lady, I have a house, but in a distant land. My wife and young daughters are at home and my sons are in Kufa but perhaps they will wait for me for ever." After a brief pause he added: "In this unfriendly town I have no home and no soul to whom I can turn for shelter."

These words of despondency moved the lady. Sympathetically she said: "You appear to be a traveller or wayfarer from some distant land. From where do you come and why are you here in these troubled times."

Muslim murmured in reply: "I am from the city of the Prophet. I came on the invitation of the people of Kufa as their guest. Though thousands welcomed me on my arrival, there is now not a soul who will admit me into his house."

The venerable old lady was taken aback by this reply. She raised the candle she was carrying to bring it nearer Muslim's face. With an exclamation of recognition she bent down on her knees and said: "My God, you are Muslim, the emissary of my Imam, my beloved Husain, who is hunted by Obeidullah's soliders. How did I not recognise you at the first glance when your words, your accent, your demeanour, all had the stamp of people of the Prophet's House." Sobbing bitterly and overcome by contrition she added, "How will I face my lady Fatima on the day of reckoning when she will ask me: 'Taha, my Husain's emissary came to you, friendless and shelterless, but you callously and relentlessly turned him out!' What reply will I give to her? The least that I can do for you is to give you shelter in my house till an opportunity arises for you to make good your escape from this cursed city whose people are steeped in perfidy."

Muslim felt reluctant to accept her offer for fear that the Godfearing old lady might be victimised for giving him protection. But on second thought he decided to stay in her house with the hope that, if he could avoid arrest for some time, he might be able to find some one to carry his message to Husain.

Taha asked Muslim to remain in the attic of the house. She gave him whatever food there was in the house but he could hardly partake of

anything. How can a person in his predicament relish food? He decided to pass the night in prayers as he had a premonition that this would be his last night.

Before retiring into the attic, Muslim told Taha about his desire to send a message to the Imam not to come to Kufa in view of what had transpired. She assured him that when her son, who was in the Government armed forces, returned from his beat, she would take him in her confidence and enlist his support in finding some reliable person for this job.

Hardly a few hours had passed when Taha's son returned home. He looked tired and worn out. When Taha enquired from him the reason for his coming home so late, he told her that, along with other soliders, he was patrolling the streets in search of Muslim. She was aghast at the thought that her son, of all people, should be in the party searching for Muslim, when she herself was so devoted to the House of the Prophet. She strongly protested to her son at the role he was playing. That cunning man turned round and assured his mother that, though he had in the course of his duty to pretend as if he was searching for Muslim, in reality he was as much devoted to Muslim, and the House of the Prophet, as she was. His disingenuous assurances carried conviction to the simple old lady and, after making him swear by his faith, she took her son into confidence and told him everything about the happenings of that evening. The crafty son of Taha was inwardly elated at the thought that he would be able to collect the prize placed on Muslim's head. His first thought was to behead Muslim in his sleep but, a coward that he was, he got scared at the fate that would befall him if Muslim would wake up before he accomplished his purpose. He thought furiously for a few moments and then decided to go and inform Obeidullah Ibne Ziad that he had Muslim in his house and he could be easily captured. His warped mind quickly invented an excuse for going out in the dead of night, without arousing the suspicions of his noble mother. He told her that, as in his presence, Hance Ibne Orwah, at whose house Muslim and his two sons were staying, had been beheaded and as the two young boys were roaming the streets of Kufa, he thought it his bounden duty to search for them and bring them home so that the father and sons could be reunited. He told Taha that he would also see one of his trusted friends and through

him arrange to convey Muslim's message to the Imam for which he was so anxious. Taha was taken in by the guiles of her perfidious son. She felt elated that her son was so keen to do the good work that he could not wait till the daybreak.

The av<sup>a</sup>icious son of Taha hastened to the Governor's house and lost no time in getting himself admitted to his presence. In fact Obeidullah was awake waiting for the news of Muslim's arrest as he was mightily afraid that, if Muslim would remain at large, he might succeed in rallying round him a few persons who could offer very stiff opposition to his forces and even upset his ugly plans. He felt relieved and overjoyed at the tidings brought to him by Taha's treacherous son. He immediately ordered one of the commanders of his forces to get together a well-equipped contingent for Muslim's arrest.

Accompanied by mounted soldiers, the traitor returned to his house for Muslim's arrest. Muslim was at that time engaged in prayers. When he heard the beating of several horses' hoofs on the paved roads, he understood that the soldiers had come for his arrest. He snatched his sword which was lying by his side and rushed out. Taha stood at the threshold of her house flabbergasted to see that her son had brought the soldiers for the arrest of her revered guest. She fell on Muslim's feet and cried: "Muslim, my prince, how can I explain to you that I have not betrayed you but my cursed son, whom I trusted and never suspected of such blatant treachery, has ruined me. I shall not let them cross my threshold except over my dead body." Muslim did not require to be told that Taha's averments were sincere. He gently told her, "My benefactor, I know that you have been very kind and considerate to me and the thought of selling me out cannot even cross your noble and pious mind. I do not in the least blame you for the treachery of your son. As your guest, who has partaken of your hospitality, I cannot allow you to be killed by these merciless brutes and let your house be reduced to shambles. Let me go out of the house and sell my life as dearly as I can."

Muslim gently pushed aside Taha from the threshold and walked out with sword in his hand. By this time the soldiers had reached the house. They were taken by surprise at seeing Muslim emerging from the door



like an enraged lion. The lane was so narrow that two horses could not come up abreast. This gave Muslim the best opportunity for single combat. Though he was on foot and the soldier opposite to him was mounted, he possessed the prowess which was the heritage of Ali's family. One after the other the soldiers were tasting the sword of this warrior and falling down from their horses. In the process they were getting crushed and trampled under the hoofs of horses of their own men.

The leader of the band of soliders, who had discreetly kept himself behind his men, sent word for more men. Though more and more soldiers were pouring in, the topography of the scene of this street battle was such that they could not attack en masse. Heads of enemy soldiers were falling like nine-pins. Hours passed but still Muslim was fighting his defensive battle most courageously.

When Obeidullah Ibne Ziad's couriers, who were bringing to him the news of the fight, informed him that Muslim was giving a fight the like of which had not been seen since the days of Ali, the Khalif, he got infuriated. He tauntingly asked his generals how many thousands of warriors they needed to capture one solitary person. One of them angrily retorted to him that he was forgetting that the person to be captured was not an ordinary home-keeping youth or shop-keeper but a renowned warrior of the House of Ali. He even suggested that if Obeidullah had no confidence in the generals, he could himself demonstrate his skill with the sword by offering combat to Muslim. This suggestion scared the wits out of Obeidullah. He, of all people, knew what it meant to cross swords with Ali's nephew. Swallowing the taunt, he replied: "My good general, I fully know what it means to fight with a person so desperate who finds himself at bay. Instead of letting our men die by his sword in such large numbers, why cannot some one adopt some stratagem to make him leave his vantage position so that it may be easier to attack him from all sides?"

This suggestion appealed very much to the cowardly soldiers of Kufa. After some consultations amongst themselves, they decided to send soldiers to the top of <sup>the</sup> roof of an adjoining building and from there to hurl stones, burning embers and missiles at Muslim. It did not take them long to carry out their strategy. With showers of arrows, stones,

fire and missiles, Muslim was so much wounded that he decided to give up his vantage position. He charged on the soldiers in front of him and they fell back. He went forward, wielding his sword, and in the process, sending those who were within its reach to the perdition and doom which they merited.

Once again hasty counsels were held among the captains of the army. Some one suggested that, since Muslim was now desperately moving forward, a trench could be dug on the road and covered up with straw so that it was completely camouflaged. The idea was to trap Muslim as he marched forward. It was realised that, without such subterfuge, Muslim could not be killed or captured without sacrificing the cream of the army.

The treacherous ruse planned by Obeidullah's mercenaries worked as planned. While rushing on and wielding his sword dexterously, Muslim fell into the trench. Now those who were avoiding to come within the reach of his sword swooped down on him. With gushing blood Muslim could not regain his feet. He toppled over and lay unconscious in the trench. It was now a matter of minutes to capture him and soon he was chained and bound.

When Muslim regained consciousness, he found himself a captive. His wounds had accentuated his thirst. The dawn was now breaking and the call for prayers was raised in the mosques of Kufa. Muslim requested his captors to give him some water to drink and for ablution. Instead of acceding to his request, they mocked and jeered at him. Muslim was extremely surprised and pained to see that the people of Kufa, who were claiming to be the followers of the Prophet, were flouting the injunctions of Islam for kindness to all in a helpless predicament. Little did Muslim know that these same people would behave with utter callousness and beastliness towards Husain and his children in the not too distant future!

Before being marched off to the Court of Obeidullah, Muslim was paraded through the streets of Kufa with heavy chains on his hands and feet. The people of Kufa, who only a few days before were vying with one another just to have a glimpse of him, were now watching him from their windows with perfect equanimity, as if he was an utter stranger to them.



Some devils amongst them were hard-hearted enough to pelt stones at him.

When Muslim was presented before Obeidullah he stood erect with dignity. The Governor asked him whether he knew the fate that awaited him and his master Husain Ibne Ali. With utter disdain Muslim replied "O mercenary of Yazid, I do not care what you do to me, but I do not like to hear your cursed tongue mentioning Husain's name."

Obeidullah Ibne Ziad felt crestfallen at this bold rebuke of Muslim. With the intention of creating an impression of his magnanimity on the people who were gathered in his court, he said to Muslim, "According to the age-old Arab custom I want you to mention your last desire before you are beheaded so that I may fulfil it."

A glint of hope came into Muslim's eyes. Could he take this man at his word and ask him to send the message which he wanted to be conveyed to his master? Like a drowning man who catches at a straw, Muslim decided that, if at all, this was his only chance. He immediately replied: "Obeidullah, if you are true to your word, fulfil my last wish and send a message to my master Imam Husain, asking him to go back to Medina and abandon the idea of his visit to Kufa."

Obeidullah had never expected this request from Muslim. He had thought that perhaps Muslim might request him to spare the lives of his two young sons when they were captured, as they were sure to be. For a while he was nonplussed; he was at a loss what to say. He knew that he could not fulfil this wish of Muslim without incurring the displeasure of Yazid; but to decline this request would betray him in his true colour. His crooked mind did not take long to find a solution to this problem. He beckoned to his executioners to take Muslim to the top of the Government House and to behead him. He immediately dismissed his court and hurried back to his apartment.

When the sword of the executioner was swaying over Muslim's head, his last thoughts were with his master, Husain, whom he had loved and cherished more than anything in life. His only regret was that till the end he could not do what he wanted most, to warn Husain against the treachery of the people of Kufa. As the sword fell on his head he silently

muttered a prayer to God to so ordain that Husain may come to know of the happenings in Kufa. This was the last prayer of the brave warrior who stood steadfast in death as in life.

Merciful God did not allow Muslim's last prayer to go in vain. He who listens to the prayers emanating from the hearts of sincere devotees like Muslim, enabled one witness to the ghastly enactments of that day, who had some sparks of faith in him, to go riding out of Kufa at the earliest opportunity. He reached the camp of Imam Husain a few days after Muslim's martyrdom. He conveyed the sad tidings to Husain who wept bitterly as if his heart would rend. He called the young daughter of Muslim, who was travelling with him, and told her that thenceforth she should regard him as her guardian. He gave one pair of earrings to her and one to Sakina. When the messenger asked him whether he was turning back and returning to Medina in view of what had happened to Muslim, he replied: "I am going forward to meet my destiny; to fulfil the purpose of my life. My death is beckoning to me and so there is no question of my retracing my steps."

## II

### Fifty Four Friends

**S**OME poet, mentioning about battles has said: "Few, few shall part, where many meet." In a way this is true for most of the battles recorded in history. But the battle Karbala is unique in one respect. Not a single soldier from Husain's army survived on that fateful day. Husain and his faithful followers were outnumbered to an extent which is almost unimaginable in case of a battle. Still what valour they displayed, what heroic feats they performed, what glorious examples they set to the coming generations!

In other respects too, the battle of Karbala can claim unique features. This was the only battle before the start of which the Commander did not think it necessary to exhort his soldiers to fight bravely or to stick to their ground. On the other hand Husain assembled his devoted followers on the night before the battle and, in a touching address, explained, to them that they were free to leave him and go away with their dear ones. "Dear friends and kinsmen," he said, "I know what hardship and privations you have suffered in rallying to my side. Yazid and his men are after my blood and, if you decide to leave me, they will be too happy to give you a safe passage out of Karbala. If you think that I shall consider it a desertion and betrayal in case you leave me now, let me assure you that I consider what you have already done for me to be enough to earn my gratitude and the pleasure of God." He added after some thought, "Perhaps you may be feeling embarrassed to leave me like this. I am, therefore, putting out the lights so that, in the dark, nobody will know who has left me." Saying this, he ordered to put out the lights. In that dark tent not a soul stirred. The faithful friends and relatives of Husain were too much overcome by their emotions to say anything. After a while, when Husain saw that they would not budge an inch, he lighted the candles again. He saw all his devoted friends and loving kinsmen standing silently with heads bent and tears flowing from their eyes. Some of them were old and bent with age; some of them were young and still in the prime of youth. Others had just reached the threshold of youth. At last the silence was

broken by Habib Ibne Mazahir who spoke on behalf of all the faithful companions: "Husain, to us you are everything. How can we explain to you that for each one of us life would be a meaningless burden without you. It is not only because we know that you are the grandson of the Holy Prophet but also because we know that we cannot find a person like you, so kind, so considerate, so loving and so helpful. Although we cannot dare to call ourselves your friends, because you are so superior to us in every way, still we know that you have always treated us as if we were not what we are, your humble followers, but as if we were your dearest friends." The sentiments expressed by Habib Ibne Mazahir were echoed by all the faithful companions, Muslim Ibne Ausaja, Buraire Hamadani, Zohair Ibne Kain and others. With one voice they said: "We can only consider ourselves successful in life if we die in defending you. Without you life for us would not be worth a day's purchase." What brave souls were these faithful followers of Husain! What a unique attachment they had for him!

The friends and followers of Husain who had gathered round him in Karbala were from different walks of life. But all of them had some thing in common amongst them—their unflinching devotion for Husain, their undying love and affection for him; their supreme faith in the justice of his cause. Some of them were freemen, soldiers bold and true. Others were bondsmen who had come there with their masters but without any compulsion. Even when their masters granted them freedom and asked them to go away where they liked, not one of them budged an inch; not one of them even for a moment thought of leaving Karbala to save his life. On the contrary they earnestly entreated, out of love which was too deep-rooted and sincere to be described, that they wanted only one thing and that was freedom to lay down their lives in defending Husain. With what simplicity Jawn, the freed slave had asked: "O my lord, I am a negro slave and people say that we black people have black blood also. Give us the privilege of having our blood mingled with the blood of the martyrs on the plains of Karbala to prove that we too have feelings of devotion; that we too can respond to the call of duty without any compulsion with the spontaneity of freemen of the highest order." Overpowered by the exuberance of his emotions, he had supplicated that he should not be denied the right to demonstrate his undying devotion and love for Husain.

On that day, in the face of trials and tribulations Husain had only the consolation of knowing that he had with him a band of faithful supporters the like of whom the world had not seen. They were persons who relegated all personal considerations to the secondary plane, who did not for a moment think of what would happen to their ladies and children who survived them. The only thought uppermost in their minds was to protect and defend Husain and his family and in doing so, to consider no sacrifice too great.

To persons acquainted with these noble souls it would not be a matter of surprise that they were displaying such unflinching determination to die fighting for Husain. Was not Habib Ibne Mazahir attached to Husain from his childhood with affection unique even for a friend? In Medina, during the lifetime of the Prophet, when Habib was a child of about 8 years and was playing with other lads of his age, the Prophet had picked him up, whilst passing by, and had fondly caressed the child. The companions of Muhammad (S.A.), who were with him at that time, were surprised at this because, although they knew his love and affection for children, his picking up this child in particular had seemed inexplicable to them. One of them had ventured to ask Muhammad (S.A.) the reason for this special fondling of this boy Habib. Muhammad (S.A.), with tears in his eyes, had replied that he had seen Habib devotedly following his Husain wherever he went; he had seen him literally kissing the ground treaded by Husain. The Prophet added that he could foresee a day when this very child would befriend Husain in a manner which would make his name immortal. Surely this was the occasion Muhammad (S.A.) was referring to. Husain must be aware of this prophecy for, when he arrived in Karbala, the first thing he did was to write to Habib, who was in Kufa, informing him that he and his kinsmen had arrived in Karbala and were surrounded by Yazid's hordes. When Habib received this letter, he was having his dinner with his wife. On reading the letter he wept bitterly. When his wife asked him what had happened, he told her about its contents. He also told her that, earlier that day, when he had gone to the market to buy henna, he had heard the news that the forces sent by Obeidullah Ibne Ziad, Governor of Kufa, to massacre Husain and his family, had surrounded him from all sides. He told her that, on hearing about this, he had thrown away the henna which he had purchased for dyeing his hair and decided that there would be no need for it now since his own blood, flowing in Husain's defence, would

dye his hair. He added that, since that time, he was brooding over how he should break this news to her. He offered to give her freedom and all he had, if she so desired. That faithful lady told Habib that she would stand by him. She said that she was feeling proud at the noble decision that he had taken to lay down his life in defence of Husain. She added: "A friend in need is a friend indeed. You have been taking pride in the fact that Husain treats you and regards you as his childhood friend. His faith in you is borne out by the fact that, of all people, he has written to you in his hour of need. I wish you Godspeed."

Habib was possessed by one thought—to reach Karbala as quickly as possible so that his reaching there may not become too late. He asked his faithful slave, whom he had taken in his confidence and informed about his plans, to take his horse outside the town that very night and wait for him there so that he could quietly go there to ride towards Karbala without anybody knowing about it. When in the dead of night Habib reached the spot where his slave was waiting for him with the horse, he heard the slave impatiently muttering: "I wonder what has delayed my master so much. If he has been arrested on his way to this place, or prevented forcibly from coming here, I shall myself ride off to Karbala on this horse and tell Husain that my master was not forgetful of his obligations, was not oblivious of the demands of faithful friendship, but was forcibly prevented from coming. It would be the acme of success in life for me if I can fight for Husain and lay down my life in defending him." Habib blessed his faithful slave for his nobility and freed him on the spot. Leaving Kufa, he reached Karbala on the night of the 9th of Muharram, when Husain was distributing arms amongst the few selfless souls who were left in his camp. He had kept aside one set of arms and, when some of his companions asked him the reason for doing so, he replied: "Habib, my dearest friend, is sure to come when he hears about my plight. These arms are kept for him."

In Husain's camp there was a young lad, Wahab, who had just got married and was returning to his hometown with his mother and the newly-wed bride. Passing through Karbala, they found some tents pitched on one side and a large army poised against the few in those camps. On enquiries Wahab came to know that Husain, son of Ali, and grandson of the Prophet had been surrounded on all sides by Yazid's

hordes who were insisting on Husain either to accept Yazid's spiritual leadership or to die at their hands. Wahab carried the news to his wife and mother. The mother of Wahab, who had known Husain from his childhood and who was an ardent admirer of Ali for his fearless battles against forces of tyranny and oppression, knew that Husain would never yield to these threats and bow his head in submission to the will of a profligate and debaucherous person like Yazid, who had openly flouted all the injunctions of Islam and who was taking pride in defying and breaking Islamic principles, precepts and practices. When Moaviya, the father of Yazid, was ruling in Damascus and propagating hatred of Ali and the Prophet's family, this courageous lady, who was living at that time in Damascus, had been openly denouncing the tyranny and sacrilegious practices of Moaviya. As was Moaviya's practice, he had tried to win over this bold lady of influence by offering her large sums of money in return for her agreeing to stop praising Ali and acknowledging allegiance to him. She had, with unmitigated contempt, spurned this offer to Moaviya's amazement and chagrin. In surprise Moaviya had asked her how she could be so adamant when she knew that Ali would not give her even a silver Dirham whereas he was offering her a large sum in solid gold coins. With characteristic frankness she had retorted that the reason why she praised Ali and condemned him was that, whereas Ali was not using state funds for bringing people to his side, he was playing ducks and drakes with the funds of the treasury over which he had no right and which were held by him, according to the Prophet's ruling, in trust for the people of the Muslim State. Enraged at this, Moaviya had exiled her from Damascus after subjecting her to inhuman tortures. Undeterred by all this she had continued to praise Ali and his family. When her son Wahab was born late in her life, she had thought it her duty to inculcate in him love of Ali and his sons. She was always telling him from his childhood, day in and day out, that if an occasion arose, he should not in the least hesitate to lay down his life in defence of Ali's sons. As if by premonition, she knew that, sooner or later, there would arise a conflict between the forces of evil and oppression as represented by Moaviya and his profligate son Yazid, and forces of righteousness and Islamic virtues represented by the sons of Ali. When she was informed by Wahab that Husain, with a few faithful followers, was facing overwhelming odds, she asked her son to hurry to his aid. All three of them came over to Husain and the mother

beseeked Husain to let Wahab join his fight against Yazid's battalions. When Husain learnt that Wahab had got married only a couple of days before, he insisted on him to leave him and seek safety with his wife and mother. That brave son of a brave mother would not, however, agree to this "O Imam," he said with his head bowed, "how is it possible for me to leave you and your dear ones in this condition? If I leave you and go away, my conscience would ever sting me for failing to do my duty." He was able to convince Husain that he had made up his mind and nothing could make him change his decision.

There was in Husain's camp Muslim Ibne Ausaja, a venerable companion of the Prophet. Age had bent his back but not dampened his zeal for the cause of truth. He had seen the Prophet fondly kissing Husain. He had seen the Prophet getting down from the pulpit in the mosque at Medina in the midst of a sermon if Husain fell down by tripping over the date-leaf mat. He had beheld the Prophet's perturbation if Husain, during his childhood, cried on account of any pain suffered by him. He had been a witness to the sight when, on an Idd day, the Prophet had gone through the streets of Medina carrying Hasan and Husain on his two shoulders and uttering cries of a camel, to please these beloved children who wanted to have a camel ride. He had heard one of the Prophet's companions exclaim in amazement at this sight: "What a wonderful mount these children have got!" and the Prophet's prompt reply: "Nay, do not say that. You may rather say what excellent riders I have got." This aged follower of Husain could not even bear the thought of leaving Husain in this hour of trial, though Husain did his best to convince him that, at his age of more than four score and ten, engaging in a battle was unthinkable. Though age had physically withered him, his enlightened spirit sustained him and added to his unswerving determination to fight for Husain and shed his blood to the last drop.

There was Buraire Hamadani, that brave warrior whose prowess in single combat had become legendary. When he saw that Amr Saad and his men had made up their mind to kill Husain and his kinsmen, he was itching to give them a taste of his sword which had always struck terror in his enemies' hearts. With difficulty Husain was able to restrain him and convince him that his purpose was not to attack the enemy but to defend and die like martyrs. This brave warrior had called a meeting

of the 53 other followers of Husain on the eve of the 10th of Muharram and urged them to guard Husain and his people against any ambush or surprise attack. He had cautioned them that the enemy, who were known for their stealthy and crafty tactics, might make a surprise attack during the night and kill Husain and, if this happened during their lifetime, an indelible stigma would attach to all of them which nothing they would do, could wipe out. It was Burair who, while standing guard outside Husain's tent, had overheard the talk between Husain and his sister Zianab, when she had enquired anxiously from him whether his followers, who were with him, would fight for him or leave him. He had, on hearing this, called his other companions and, with bowed head, assured Zainab that each of them considered it a great honour to fight for her brother and die for him. In token of their earnestness, at his instance, each follower had broken the sheath of his sword by way of assurance to Zainab that they would not put back the sword in their scabbards till death came to them. It was this brave Burair who, during his rounds of the camp, had heard the cries of the thirsty children for water and had called a few of the friends of Husain to make arrangements to bring at least one bag full of water to wet the dry lips of the children. He and the gallant few had marched towards the river bank with determination to get water, cost what it might. When challenged by the soldiers of Amr Saad, who were guarding the river banks, and being asked as to who he was and for what he had come, he had boldly told them that he was Buraire Hamadani, follower of Husain, and had come to take water from the river to Husain's camp for the thirsty children of the Imam. "We have not the least objection to you and your friends drinking as much water as you want," they had replied, "but we cannot allow you to take a drop of water for Husain's children." How infuriated he had got at this reply and shouted back at them: "Oh heartless brutes you have no consideration for the helpless children of Husain whom thirst is killing by inches? So long as these innocent children do not get water, it is unthinkable for any of us to taste even a drop of it." When they mockingly rejected his request, full of rage and full of grief, he had added: "If that is your final reply, be ready to fight us, for we shall not go back without water, whatever the consequences." With what bravery he and a handful of his friends had fought and dispersed the regiment that was guarding the river, and with what satisfaction he had filled the bag with water and hurried towards the camp, defending against the onslaughts of the soldiers

who had scurried there to prevent water being carried to the children! How with pride and satisfaction he had placed the bag of water at the feet of the thirsty children who had stampeded round the water-bag with shouts of joy and thrown themselves on it! With what dismay and dejection he had seen the tied end of the bag opening under the crush of the thirsty children and water flowing out on the dry soil, and the children crying with disappointment and rubbing their bodies on the wet sand! Moved to tears at this heart-rending sight, how he had exclaimed in utter despondency: "Alas, Burair's efforts have gone in vain and the thirst of these innocents has remained unquenched!"

Husain's depleted army, if it is permissible to give that nomenclature to that handful of warriors, had an eleventh hour addition. It was Hur, son of Yazide Riyahi, who had come over to Husain's side on the eve of the battle of Karbala. This brave warrior, who commanded a battalion in the army of Amr Saad, had his first encounter with Husain on his way to Karbala. Hur's forces had exhausted their water supply whilst proceeding to meet Husain and his men with the intention of preventing him from proceeding towards Kufa and bringing him to the plain of Karbala. His men and horses were so thirsty that their tongues were jutting out from their mouths. When Husain saw this conditions of Hur's men, he offered to them the water which he was carrying with him. Husain and Abbas personally supervised this operation and not only gave to Hur's men all the water they needed but also allowed their horses to drink to their fill. After this Hur had asked Husain to proceed towards the plain of Karabla. In spite of Husain's protestations, he had remained adamant. Husain, knowing that this brave soldier was acting according to his superior's instructions, without realising the cosequences of his actions, agreed to divert his route.

When Hur cut off Husain's route and forced him to proceed to Karbala, he was under the belief that a peaceful solution could be found in the course of negotiations with Amr Saad. Little did he realise that the army of Syria would dare to spill the blood of the Prophet's grandson and his beloved ones. Only on the night of the 9th of Muharram, when an announcement was made by Amr Saad and Shimr that on the next day no quarter would be given to Husain and his men, he realised what a great mistake he had made in forcing Husain to come to Karbala against his

will. He was overcome by repentance. Contrition was gnawing at his heart. He realised that Husain had nothing but peaceful intentions for, had that not been the case, he could have easily defeated him when he had intercepted Husain's men even after giving water to his men and beasts. He had himself pleaded with Amr Saad to make water available to Husain and his kinsmen and thirsty children, narrating the incident of Husain providing water to his men when they were on the verge of collapse on account of thirst, aggravated by the heat of the desert. But all his pleadings and persuasions had been in vain. Whatever he had urged, had fallen on deaf ears,

Hur was pacing the floor of his tent like a caged lion. Repentance was eating up the heart of this gallant soldier at the realisation that he was instrumental in placing in this dangerous state Husain, whom he had in his heart of hearts always admired and respected. He was shaking with rage like a twig in a field facing a gust of wind. He was now conscious of the fact that the least he could do was to go over to Husain and offer to die in defending him before any of his other friends and followers. One of his colleagues, who saw him in this agitated state while peeping into his tent, asked him with great surprise: "Well, Hur, I know that most of the soldiers and officers in our camp are trembling in their shoes at the thought of fighting against the brave sons and grandsons of Ali tomorrow. But I thought you would be an exception and would not be frightened by the thought of meeting your death on the battlefield." He replied with disdain in his voice: "I am not afraid of facing death, but I shudder to think what perdition I shall have to face on the Day of Resurrection if I fought against the grandson of the Prophet who was my benefactor when my men and I were at his mercy and were overpowered by thirst. What answer will I be able to give to my Maker on the Day of Judgment when He will ask me why I had betrayed my own benefactor?"

It did not take Hur very long to resolve his mental conflict. It was a difficult choice for him—either to choose the worldly gains, the fishes and loaves of office, power and pelf which he would get in plenty by remaining in Yazid's army, or to accept certain death which awaited him in case he went over to Husain's camp. It was a choice between hell and heaven and he unhesitatingly chose the latter without any mental reservations. He revealed his intentions to his son and faithful slave. Both of them wholeheartedly agreed with his choice and decided to cross over to Husain's side

regardless of the consequences. All three of them mounted their horses and rode towards Husain's camp. Before reaching the outskirts of Husain's camp, they dismounted from their horses. They were hearing a hum of prayers from the tents of Husain's followers and frequent cries of thirsty children. Hur felt that he was responsible for bringing Husain and his family to this state and whatever he did, could not remove the stigma that would for ever attach to him for the role he had played in bringing Husain to Karbala. He asked his son to tie up his hands so that he could surrender himself to Husain and abjectly ask for his forgiveness.

Seeing all three of them approaching towards their camp, Husain and Abbas came forward. Hur fell down on his knees and begged Husain to forgive him for what he had done. "Had I known that my action on that day would come to such a pass," he said, "I would never have so obstinately insisted on your changing your route." With tears in his eyes he entreated: "O" Husain, my master, I consider my crime so heinous and unpardonable that I cannot even dare to ask you for your forgiveness. The least I can do now is to lay down my life first, before any one from amongst you is killed. I have brought my son with me to die in defending your sons. I throw myself on your mercy and implore you to forgive me as, without your pardon, I can never redeem my soul."

Husain was deeply moved by Hur's words. Advancing towards him, he embraced him with a cordiality peculiar to him and said: "Hur, my noble friend, I do not in the least blame you for what you have done. The strength of character you have displayed by spurning all worldly gains and all the tempting allurements of this worldly life which would have come to you, had you remained on the other side, has added inches to your moral stature. If there is at all anything to be forgiven, I have already forgiven you. Nay, I consider you to be my honoured guest. My regret is that I cannot do anything for you all at this time when, ~~spare~~ <sup>save</sup> means of entertaining you, we do not have even a morsel of food or a drop of water to offer you."

Hur was rendered speechless at this display of generosity. He had heard so much of the forgiveness and other noble traits in the character of the grandsons of the Prophet but he was surprised that, without a word of reproach, without the least castigation, without the least bitterness or rancour, Husain had welcomed him with open arms.

Like moths hovering round a candle, Husain's companions and ~~men~~<sup>kins</sup> surrounded him throughout the night. It was a sleepless night for them every minute of which was spent in the remembrance of the Creator or in exhorting one another to see that no harm came to Husain so long as any of them was alive. With the breaking of dawn, Ali Akbar gave the call for morning prayers. As they were making preparations for their prayers, a volley of arrows greeted them from the enemy's side. Amr Saad was the first to fling the arrow in Husain's direction, after calling his men to bear witness to his act before Yazid. Blinded by the lure of rewards, he began the day with a despicable deed which was to condemn him and his name till eternity.

Seeing the hostile actions of the enemy, Husain's friends and companions held hasty consultations and decided that a few of them should stand round Husain while the rest of the congregation engaged in prayers, so that no harm was done to them by the enemy's arrows. Standing as shields in front of the Imam, these brave soldiers were moving from side to side, not to dodge the arrows, but to receive them on their bodies so that those engaged in prayers may not be wounded. When the prayers were over, about 23 of Husain's soldiers were seriously wounded.

With the rising of the sun, the enemy started beating battle-drums. Above the din of the battle-drums rose the cries of enemy soldiers challenging Husain to send his men for combats with them. Hur was adamantly insisting that he and his son and slave, whom he loved as much as his son, should be allowed to go first. Perhaps he had at the back of his mind the idea that the battalion of 1,000, which he had commanded in Amr Saad's army, could be moved by his appeal on Husain's behalf and, if he succeeded in making them waver, the others too might follow suit. He had some ray of hope that he might be able to save the day and undo what he had done by bringing Husain to Karbala.

Mounting his horse on getting permission from Husain, Hur marched out with his son and slave. Pausing before the army of Yazid, he delivered a harangue full of eloquence and persuasion. He told the enemy soldiers that only till the previous night he was with them but when the realisation of what he was doing had dawned on him, he had decided to go over to the side of truth and justice represented by Husain. He told them that

at that time he had felt as if he was poised on the top of a huge ridge of fate, on one side of which lay heaven and on the other hell; that he had made the choice realising that this world was transitory and all that it offered was ephemeral. He eloquently urged them to realise that all the bewitching things and adornments which life offered them were like apples of Sodom, good to look at, but gall and worm-wood to the taste. He quoted to them verses from the Quran to the effect that killing of an innocent camel of a Prophet of yore had brought down the wrath of God. He asked them to reflect on what their killing of the beloved grandson of the Prophet of Islam, whom he had loved and adored so much, would bring down on them. His words cast a magnetic spell on the forces which were erstwhile under his command. Shimr realised that all would be lost if Hur was allowed to speak further to the army under his command. He whispered to Amr Saad to order his men to attack Hur, his son and slave without meeting them in single combats, though such an attack was contrary to the accepted rules of battles in those days. Amr Saad at once ordered his army to launch a mass attack on the three of them and promised fabulous rewards to those who succeeded in killing them. The cupidity of those hirelings of Yazid was aroused and, forgetting everything, they fell upon Hur, his son and slave. All three of them wielded their swords in defence. Such was their skill with the sword that, though hopelessly outnumbered, they killed enemy soldiers by dozens. Tearing the enemy ranks, Hur rusheed through them dexterously using his sword. Very soon the odds began to tell against all three of them. First to fall was Hur's son and then his slave. Hur had advanced a considerable distance fighting the foes on both sides of him. Exhausted with the flow of blood from a deep head wound, he became giddy and fell over from his horse. Even at that moment he had a desire to hear from Husain's lips once again that he had forgiven him. Mustering all his strength he shouted for Husain before he fell from the horse and became unconscious.

On hearing Hur's cry Husain and Abbas rushed out from the camp, swords in hand. Piercing the enemy ranks, they reached the place where Hur was lying. Husain lifted his head and put it in his lap. He cleansed the blood and tied his kerchief, which had been woven by his mother Fatima with her own hands, as a bandage for the wound. Hur opened his eyes and looked straight into Husain's eyes. Though he was speechless, his eyes conveyed to Husain his message. Husain understood



and affectionately put his hand on Hur's head exclaiming: "May God bless you for the noble role you have played today in befriending me." Hearing these words Hur breathed his last with his head still resting in Husain's lap. Husain and Abbas lifted the dead body and carried it to the camp.

After Hur came the turn of the other devoted friends of Husain. Each of them was vying with the others to sacrifice his life first. Each seemed to be burning with the desire to die in defending Husain and his beloved ones. Habib Ibne Mazahir, Muslim Ibne Ausaja, Buraire Hamadani, Zohair Ibne Kain, Jawan and others went out to fight against tremendous odds, felled many warriors in single combats, and fell fighting bravely against the attack of a host of enemies. Each of them called Husain as he fell from horseback: "My master, I convey to you my last salutations." On each occasion Husain, with Abbas, Akbar, and his other followers and friends, rushed out to be at the side of his dying friend. His friends would ask their dying brethren whether they had any last wish to convey. The invariable reply was: "Yes, so long as you are alive, see that no harm comes to Husain or any member of his family." Those of them who were rendered speechless would just point towards Husain and by signs convey to the others that their last wish was that all the companions should fight to the bitter end in defence of Husain so that at least, so long as they were alive, no enemy could dare to inflict any wounds on Husain.

There was a regular procession of dead bodies coming to the morgue in Husain's camp. From early in the morning Husain was lifting the bodies of the martyrs, his faithful defenders and carrying them to his camp assisted by Abbas, Ali Akbar and the others. He was insisting on doing this himself because he considered this to be the least he could do for those noble souls who had displayed love and devotion for him in these most trying circumstances the like of which the world had not witnessed. In this way he carried the bodies of Muslim Ibne Ausaja, Zohair Ibne Kain, Buraire Hamadani, Jawan, Habib Ibne Mazahir, and the rest. He used to weep copiously over their dead bodies, remembering their love and affection for him, their deep devotion and their spirit of sacrifice. The death of each faithful friend was proving a crippling blow for Husain. These brave soldiers did not have their families with them in Karbala who could mourn their death; but Husain's sisters and daughters

and the ladies of his house were mourning their death as if they were their own brothers and sons.

Wahab Ibne Abdullah Kalabi, the young newly-married warrior who had joined Husain's camp was the last to go. Every time he was coming to Husain and begging him for permission to go to the battlefield and die fighting, but Husain was holding him back. When all of Husain's faithful friends were exhausted, this young lad fell at Husain's feet and entreated him to let him go. Husain told him that, since he had his mother and newly-wed wife with him, he should secure their permission because he owed a duty to them. The mother of Wahab, who was nearby, heard this and told the Imam that since that morning she had been insisting upon her son to fight in defence of Husain before all the others. "I have nourished him with my milk in his childhood," she said, "and I shall consider him my son only if he dies defending you as the others have done." According to Husain's bidding Wahab went to his bride to seek her permission. With tears in her eyes she said to him: "It is your first and foremost obligation to defend the Prophet's grandson and his family even at the cost of your life. I hope to meet you in heaven. I expect you to meet me at the threshold of heaven and to pray that our meeting there may not be long delayed." After a short silence she added reflectively, "I know that the enemy will not spare a single male member of Husain's family and they will make us women captives. It is very likely that they will show some respect to the ladies of Husain's family out of regard for the Prophet; but they may not show the same consideration to me and your mother. I only want you to request the Imam that he may leave us with the ladies of his family so that we may be treated with the respect that will be accorded to them." Husain assured Wahab that his wife and mother would be looked after by Zainab and Kulsum and the other ladies of his house. Little did Wahab's wife realise that the heartless soldiers of Yazid would treat the ladies of the Prophet's house worse than ordinary captives and slaves! Wahab went out into the battlefield and died fighting gallantly like the rest of his companions.

History of mankind is replete with instances where brave persons have risen to great heights fighting for noble causes. There are instances where out of love and affection, or sense of duty and devotion, people have endured hardship and sufferings and died in defence of ideals they

cherished. But never before or after deeds of such selfless devotion and self abnegation have been witnessed as in Karbala on that memorable day. How truly Hur had spoken to the army of Yazid that in this transitory world nothing endures for ever and death is the inevitable goal of every living soul. The hirelings of Yazid, who for the sake of worldly gains shed the blood of innocent martyrs, are all dead and forgotten, and not a stone tells where they lie. The names of those who played a leading role in conducting the carnage on that day, are remembered with feelings of contempt and disgust. The remembrance of their dastardly deeds evokes feelings of revulsion. On the other hand what the friends and followers of Husain did in the battle of Karbala has made their names immortal. Their heroic deeds are recalled and narrated every year during the month of Muharram throughout the length and breadth of Islamic countries. Even in death they lie buried around Husain and his sons. Habib Ibne Mazahir's grave in the entrance-hall of Husain's Mausoleum conveys the impression that, even in death, this faithful friend of Husain is serving the duties of a sentinel as he did on the eve of the battle of Karbala. Each of them had lived a noble life and died a noble death.

### III

#### Akbar, the Hashimite Prince

THE whole town of Medina was humming with activity. People from all parts of the town were ~~coming~~ <sup>making</sup> to the street of the Hashimites where a caravan was getting ready for a journey. The elders of the town were talking to each other in hushed tones, recalling the words of the Prophet, that a day will dawn when his beloved grandson Husain will leave Medina with his sons, brothers, nephews and kinsmen—never to return. There was sadness on the faces of all, young and old. The elderly people were aghast at the thought of Husain going away for ever. They were accustomed to turning to him in all their needs. The youths of Medina were saddened by the thought of Abbas and Ali Akbar and Qasim going away for good. Their anxious enquiries could only elicit this much information that Husain, with his kinsmen and children, was going for Hajj and from there to an unknown destination.

Thoughts of parting were tormenting not only the male population of Medina but also the womenfolk of the town. They too were accustomed to the munificence of the ladies of the Prophet's house. Who ~~was~~ <sup>was</sup> there amongst them who had not received help and counsel from the daughters of Fatima? Who would be left now to whom they could turn in their hour of need, when Zainab and Kulsum, Umme Rubab and Umme Laila had left Medina? Had not times out of number their children received gifts and favours from Sakina and Rokayya?

As was their wont, the people of Medina, men and women, young and old, had gone to the tomb of the Prophet to pray and seek solace—to pray to God with the invocations of his Prophet that they may be spared the ordeal of separation from Husain and his family. There at the tomb of the Prophet they witnessed a heart-rending scene. They saw Husain and Zainab, prostrate with grief and sorrow, bidding farewell to the Prophet. They saw both of them visiting the grave of Fatima and lamenting over the separation, as if they were parting for ever.

It was rumoured that Husain was leaving Medina to arrange the marriage of his son Ali Akbar with some Princess, some lady of a noble stock in some distant land. Could this rumour be correct? They all knew that there was not a young lad of marriageable age in Arabia who could be said to be fit to hold a candle before him. His handsome looks were matched by his handsome deeds. His nobility of character, his sense of duty, his generosity, his chivalry, his geniality, his love of justice and fairplay had endeared him to every soul. It was a well-known fact amongst the Arabs throughout Hedjaz that Ali Akbar was bearing a remarkable resemblance to the Holy Prophet. In looks, in voice, in mannerism, in gait and in every way, he resembled the Prophet. The resemblance was so marked that people from far and wide were coming to see him, to be reminded of the Prophet whom they were missing so much. Those who had not had the good fortune to see the Prophet were told by their elders that Ali Akbar was the very image of Muhammad, may Peace of Allah be on him. There could, therefore, be no room for doubt that the noblest families of Arabia would consider it a signal honour if this scion of the Prophet's family were to ask for their daughter in marriage. But then, if Husain and his family were leaving Medina for Ali Akbar's marriage, they would not be secretive about it. The Prophet's grandson would in that case have given out the good tidings to the public. There was not a living being in that town whose heart would not have been filled with joy to hear about the betrothal of Ali Akbar. And if marriage of Ali Akbar was the purpose, surely Husain would not choose this season when, outside the oasis of Medina, the scorching heat of summer was baking the desert sands!

After long discussions, by a consensus of opinion, it was decided to approach Husain in a delegation and to dissuade him from undertaking the journey. Some of the venerable companions of the Prophet undertook to apprise Husain of their forebodings and their recollection of his grandfather's prophecy that, if Husain migrated from Medina with his family, he would not return.

The caravan was almost ready to depart. The horses were neighing with impatience and champing their bits in the oppressive heat of that day. Husain was standing near his horse intently watching the arrangements being made by Abbas and Ali Akbar. He was reflectively following

their movements as they were helping each lady and each child to mount the camels, as they were lending a helping hand to the ladies with tender care and affection; as the ladies were graciously and profusely thanking them for the excellent arrangements they had made for their comforts and for protecting them from the unbearable heat by holding their own gowns over their heads as a canopy. This sight had some inexplicable effect on Husain, for his eyes were glittering with tears. The solicitude displayed by his brother and son for the ladies and children should have field him with happiness; but instead, the effect on him was just the opposite. Was he beholding the shadows of some coming events?

At this moment came the representatives of the people of Medina. With one voice they entreated Husain to abandon the idea of undertaking this journey. Their leader, with supplication in his faltering voice, beseeched Husain to tell them why he had decided to leave them and the Prophet's tomb for which he had so much attachment. "O Son of the Prophet, if we have displeased you in any way, please forgive us." At this display of love and affection Husain was moved to tears. Suppressing his sobs he replied: "My dear brethren, believe me that my heart is bleeding at this parting—parting from you and from the graves of my beloved grandfather, my dearest mother and my brother, whom I held dearer than my life. Had it not been for the call of duty, I assure you I would have abandoned the idea of leaving Medina. It grieves me most that I cannot for once grant you your wishes when you all love me so dearly. But Almighty Allah has so willed it and in His divine dispensation ordained that I should undertake this journey. I know what hardships await me; but the Prophet has groomed me from my childhood to face them."

Seeing that the hand of destiny was snatching away Husain from them, they conferred amongst themselves and suggested that, if his decision to go from Medina was final, he should take with him all the able-bodied persons of the town so that they could protect him and his people. They reminded him of the treachery that was pervading the atmosphere in the adjoining regions. Husain, obviously moved by their sincere consideration for his safety, thanked them profusely. But he told them that, in accordance with the wishes of the Prophet, he had to fulfil the mission of his life only with those who were destined to be associated with him in the task confronting him.

When they received this reply from Husain to their entreaties, the representatives of Medinites requested Husain to grant them one wish—to leave Ali Akbar behind him in Medina. “O Husain,” they said, “we cannot bear the thought of parting with your son Ali Akbar, He is the very image of the Prophet. Whenever we feel overcome by the remembrance of Muhammad, we go to Ali Akbar to have a look at him and take comfort. We shall look after him better than we look after our own sons. We promise that we shall treat his every wish as a command. In fair weather and foul we shall stand by him. Even if we die, we shall command our children as our dying wish to attend to all his comforts and needs. His exemplary life has been an object lesson for our sons who are devoted to him as if he were their brother.” These pleadings, which had a ring of sincerity and earnestness, rendered Husain quite speechless for a time. How could he tell them what was in store for Ali Akbar whom they loved and adored so much? When his sad reflections had subsided, he replied to them in a tone tinged with pathos, “Alas, I only wish I could entrust my Ali Akbar to your care! In my mission he has to play a role, the importance of which time alone will tell. I cannot accede to your request for reasons which I cannot reveal to you; but rest assured that I shall always remember your kindness to me. I shall carry with me vivid memories of this parting and remember you in my prayers.”

When the heavens were glowing with the last steps of day, the caravan left on its long-drawn journey to the unknown destination. Soon darkness descended upon Medina as if symbolic of the darkness and gloom which the departure of Husain had cast on the town, associated with a myriad memories of his childhood.

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Meandering through the desert, the caravan had reached its destination—a destination which Allah had Willed for it. The march of Husain and his kinsmen in this world had ended; but it was just the beginning of their march towards their real goal. With the dawn of the 10th day of the month of Muharram the events, for which the Prophet and Ali and Fatima had prepared Husain, started unfolding themselves. What a day it was and what fateful events it encompassed!

One by one the faithful followers went out to fight for the cause of Islam which forces of evil were attempting to stifle, and in the process

faced death. In their glorious deaths they demonstrated what steadfastness and unflinching faith, what courage of conviction can achieve and attain against all odds. With his devoted supporters now sleeping the sweet slumber of death from which nothing could awaken them, the turn of Husain's sons and brothers and nephews came. In spite of Husain's best efforts to send his son Ali Akbar to the battlefield before all his devoted friends and faithful followers, they would not even let him mention it. The thought of Ali Akbar, Husain's beloved son, laying down his life in battle, when they were still alive, was too much for them. It would be blasphemous for them even to entertain such an idea!

Ali Akbar went over to his father to ask his permission to go out into that gory arena from which no person from his camp had returned. Husain looked at his face; it would be more correct to say that for a couple of minutes his stare was fixed on that face which he loved so much; which reminded him every time of his grandfather whom he resembled every inch. He tried to say something but his voice failed him. With considerable effort he whispered with downcast eyes: “Akbar, I wish you had become a father; then you would have known what I am experiencing at this moment. My son, how can a father ask his son to go, when he knows that the parting would be for ever! But Akbar, the call of duty makes me helpless in this matter. Go to your mother, and to your aunt Zainab who has brought you up from childhood and loved you and cared for you more than for her own sons, and seek their permission.” Ali Akbar entered the tent of his aunt Zainab. He found her and his mother Umme Laila gazing vacantly towards the battlefield and listening intently to the battle-cries of the enemy hordes. Their instinct made them aware that, now that all the devoted followers of Husain had laid down their dear lives defending him and them, the turn of his sons, and brothers and nephews had come. It was now only a question of time. It was only a question who would go first from amongst them.

The light footsteps of Ali Akbar roused both of them from their reverie. Both of them fixed their gaze on him without uttering a word. Zainab broke the silence with an exclamation: “Oh God, can it be true that Akbar has come to bid me and his mother the last farewell! Akbar, do not say that you are ready for the last journey. So long as my sons Aun and Muhammad are there, it is impossible for me to let you go.”

Akbar knew what love and affection his aunt Zainab had for him. He was conscious of the pangs of sorrow she was experiencing at that moment. Her affection for him transcended everything except her love for Husain. He looked at her face, and at his mother's who was rendered speechless by her surging feelings of anguish. He knew not how to tell them that he had prepared himself for the journey to Heaven that lay ahead. He summoned to his aid his most coaxing manners that had always made his mother and Zainab accede to his requests and said: "My aunt, for all my father's kinsmen the inevitable hour has come. I implore you, by the love you bear for your brother, to let me go so that it may not be said that he spared me till all his brothers and nephews were killed. Abbas, my uncle, is Commander of our army. The others are all younger than me. When death is a certainty, let me die first so that I can quench my thirst at the heavenly spring of Kausar at the hands of my grandfather." The earnestness of Akbar's tone convinced Zainab and his mother that he was determined to go. It seemed to be his last wish to lay down his life before all his kinsmen. Since on no other occasion they had denied him his wishes, it seemed so difficult to say no to his last desire. With a gasp Zainab could only say, "Akbar, my child, if the call of death has come to you, go." His mother could only say: "May God be with you, my son. With you I am losing all I had and cared for in this world. Your father has told me what destiny has in store for me. After you, for me pleasure and pain will have no difference." With these words she fell unconscious in Ali Akbar's arms.

The battle-cry from the enemy's ranks was becoming louder and louder. Ali Akbar knew that he had to go out quickly lest the enemy, seeing that their challenges for combat were remaining unanswered, got emboldened to make a concerted attack on his father's camp. Even such a thought was unbearable for him. So long as he was alive, how could he permit the onslaught of Yazid's forces on his camp where helpless women and defenceless children were lying huddled together? He gently put his mother in his aunt Zainab's arms saying: "Zainab, my aunt, I am leaving my mother to your care. I know, from your childhood, your mother Bibi Fatima has prepared you for the soul-stirring events of today and what is to come hereafter. My mother will not be able to bear the blows and calamities that are to befall her, unless you lend her your courage.

I implore you by the infinite love you bear for me to show the fortitude that you are capable of, so that your patience may sustain my mother when she sees my dead body brought into the camp's morgue. I entrust her to your care because there will be none to solace her and look after her in the years of dismay and despondency that lie ahead of her." Ali Akbar embraced his loving aunt Zainab with tender love and affection for the last time. She exclaimed: "Akbar, go. My child, I entrust you to God. To ease your last moments I promise you that, so long as I live, I shall look after Umme Laila with the affection of a mother."

With a heavy heart Ali Akbar returned to his father. There was no need for him to say that he had bid farewell to his mother and aunt Zainab, for the sorrow depicted on his face spoke volumes to Husain. Silently he rose and put the Prophet's turban on Akbar's head, tied the scabbard on his waist and imprinted a kiss on his forehead. In a failing, faltering voice he muttered: "Go Akbar, God is there to help you."

Treading heavily Akbar came out of the tent with Husain following closely behind him. He was about to mount his horse when he felt somebody tugging at his robe. He could hardly see, because his eyes were almost blinded with tears. He heard the voice of his young sister Sakina supplicating him not to leave her. "O my brother," she was saying, "do not go to that battleground from which nobody has returned alive since this morning." Softly Akbar lifted her, gently and affectionately kissed her on her face and put her down. His grief was too deep for words. Husain understood the depth of Akbar's feelings and picked up Sakina to console her.

The scene of Ali Akbar's march towards the battlefield was such as would defy description. The cries of ladies and children of Husain's camp were rising above the din of battle-cries and beating of enemy drums. It was appearing as if a dead body of an only son, dead in the prime of youth, was being taken out of a house for the last rites.

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Ali Akbar was now facing the enemy hordes. He was addressing the forces of Amr Ibne Saad with an eloquence which he had inherited from his grandfather and the Prophet. He was telling them that Husain, his father, had done them no harm and had devoted his life to the cause of Islam. He was explaining to them that by shedding the blood of Husain

and his kinsmen, they would be incurring the Wrath of God and displeasure of the Prophet who had loved Husain more than any other person. He was exhorting them not to smear their hands with the blood of a person so holy, so God-fearing and so righteous. His words cast a spell on the army of the opponents. The older ones from amongst them were blinking their eyes in amazement and wondering whether the Prophet had descended from the Heavens to warn them against the shedding of Husain's blood. What a resemblance there was with the Prophet, in face, features and even mannerism! Even the voice was of Muhammad! But on second thought they realised that this was Ali Akbar, the 18 year old son of Husain, about whose close resemblance with the Prophet people were talking so much.

Seeing the effect which Ali Akbar's address had produced on his soldiers, Amr Saad exhorted them to challenge him to single combat. A few of them, coveting the honour and rewards they would get if they overpowered and killed this brave son of Husain, emaciated by three days of hunger and thirst, came forward to challenge him. One by one he met them in battle, gave them a taste of his skill and prowess in fighting and flung them from their horseback to meet the doom they so much deserved. Now it was his turn to challenge the warriors of Yazid to come forward. Seeing that in spite of his handicaps, he was capable of displaying valour and battle-craft for which his grandfather Ali had acquired name and fame and which had struck terror into the hearts of enemies of Islam, none dared to come forward.

Ali Akbar had received several gaping wounds in the course of his victorious single combats. He was fast losing blood and the effect of his thirst was getting accentuated with every second that was passing. He realised that the treacherous enemies would attack him en masse. He had left his mother in a dazed condition. An irresistible urge to see his dear ones for the last time seized him and he turned his horse towards his camp.

He found his father standing at the doorstep of the tent and his mother and aunt standing inside the tent. Husain had been watching the battles of this thirsty youth and the two ladies were watching his face; they knew that if any calamity befell Ali Akbar, Husain's expression would indicate it. Whilst watching Husain's face, they were both praying

—offering silent prayers: "O Allah, Who brought back Ismail to Hajra; O Allah, Who granted the prayers of the mother of Musa and restored her son to her; O Allah, Who reunited Yakooob with his son Yousuf in response to the aged father's supplications, grant us our one wish—to see Ali Akbar for once." Was it the effect of these prayers that brought back Ali Akbar to the camp?

Ali Akbar was now facing his aged father and his loving mother and Zainab. With an exclamation of joy and relief they clung to him. Husain lovingly embraced his son saying: "Bravo, my son. The gallantry you have displayed today reminded me of the battles of my revered father, Ali. The only difference was that, during his fights, my father Ali had not to battle against hunger and thirst as you had to." Ali Akbar with his head bent replied: "Father, thirst is killing me because my wounds have added to its effect. It is usual to ask for rewards from parents for celebrating victories in single combats and I would have asked for a cup of refreshing water from you. But alas! I know that you have not even a drop of water with which you can quench the thirst of the young children. Father, knowing this, I shall not embarrass you by asking for water. I have come only to see you and my dear ones for the last time."

Ali Akbar met each and every one of his family. The second parting was sad as the first one—perhaps sadder. Without being told, every one realised that this was the last time they were beholding Akbar. Fizza, the faithful maid of Fatima and Zainab was as disconsolate with grief as Zainab and Umme Laila. Husain followed Ali Akbar out of the tent. As he rode away, Husain walked behind him with a brisk pace for some distance, as a man follows his sacrificial lamb in Mina. When Akbar disappeared from his sight, he turned heavenwards and, with his hands raised, he prayed: "O Allah, Thou art my Witness that on this day I have sent away for sacrifice one whom I loved and cherished most, to defend the cause of righteousness and truth." He sat on the ground as if trying to listen expectantly to some call from the battlefield.

It was not very long before he received a wailing call, a call from Ali Akbar, a call of anguish and pain: "Father, Akbar has fallen with a mortal wound in his chest. Father, come to me for I have not long to live. If you cannot reach me, I convey my last salutations to you and

my dear ones." Though Husain was anticipating such a call what ghastly effect it had on him! He rose from the ground and fell; he rose again and fell again. With one hand on his heart he struggled to his feet. Torrential tears were flooding his eyes. He rushed in the direction from which the cry had come. It seemed as if Husain's strength had ebbed away on hearing that fateful cry of his dearest son, for he was falling at every few steps. He was sobbing: "Akbar, give me another shout so that I can follow its direction. Akbar, my sight is gone with the shock I have received and there is nobody to guide me to where you lie." Abbas came rushing to the aid of his master. Holding his hand he led him on to the place from where Akbar's dying cry had come.

Now Husain was stumbling his way onwards resting his hands on Abbas' shoulders. The distance seemed interminable but at last Husain and Abbas reached the place where Akbar was lying in a pool of his own blood. Ah, that tragic sight! May no father have occasion to see his young son in such a condition! With one hand on his chest covering a deep wound from which blood was gushing out, with his face writhing with pains, Akbar was lying on the ground prostrate and unconscious. With the agony he was enduring on account of the wound and the thirst that he was suffering, he was digging his feet into the sand. With a cry of anguish Husain fell on the body of Akbar. "My son, tell me where you are hurt; tell me who has wounded you in the chest. Why don't you say something? My Akbar, I have come in response to your call. Say one word to me, Akbar." Seeing that Akbar was lying there without any response to his entreaties, Husain turned to Abbas and said: "Abbas, why don't you tell Akbar to say something to me. My dutiful son, who used to get up on seeing me, is lying on the ground pressed by the hand of death." Husain once again flung himself on the body of Akbar. His breathing was now heavier, a gurgling sound was coming from his throat. It seemed that his young life was engaged in an uneven struggle with death. Husain put his head on Akbar's chest. He lifted it and put his own cheeks against Akbar's and wailed "Akbar, for once open your eyes and smile, as you were always smiling to gladden my heart." Though Akbar did not open his eyes, a faint smile appeared on his lips as if he had listened to his father's request. With that sweet smile still playing on his lips, he heaved a gasp and with that his soul departed. The cheeks of the father were still touching the cheeks of the son, in death as so many times in life.

On seeing his son, his beloved son, breathe his last in his own hands, Husain's condition became such as no words can describe. For quite some time he remained there weeping as only an aged father who has lost a son, in his prime of youth, in such tragic circumstances, can weep. Abbas sat there by his side shedding tears. What words of consolation he could offer when the tragedy was of such a magnitude? All words of solace and comfort would sound hollow and be in vain when a father, an aged father, gives vent to his pent up emotions. After a time, Abbas reverentially touched Husain on his shoulders and reminded him that, since he had rushed out of the camp, Zainab and the other ladies of his house were waiting for him, tormented by anxiety, demented by the thoughts of the tragedy that had befallen them. Only mention of this was enough for Husain. He knew that, as the head of the family, it was his duty to rally by the side of the grief-stricken mother, his grief-stricken sister Zainab, and the children for whom this bereavement was the greatest calamity.

Husain slowly rose from the ground and tried to pick up the dead body of Akbar but he himself fell on the ground. Abbas, seeing this, bent over him and said: "My master, Abbas is still alive by your side. How can I leave you to carry the body of Akbar and remain a silent spectator? Let me carry his body to the camp." "No Abbas," replied Husain, "let me do this as a last token of my love. To hold him by my heart, even in his death, gives me some comfort, the only comfort that is now left to me." Saying this, he made all the efforts that he was capable of and, assisted by Abbas, he lifted the body of Akbar. Claspings it close to his bosom, he started the long walk to his camp. How he reached his camp it is difficult to say. It would not be too much to imagine that his grandfather Muhammad, his father Ali, his brother Hasan and perhaps his mother Fatima had descended from heaven to help him in this task.

Husain reached the camp and laid down Akbar's body on the ground. He called Umme Laila and Zainab and Kulsum, Sakina and Rokayya, Fizza and the other ladies of the house to see the face of Akbar for the last time. The loving mother came, the loving aunts came, the children came, and surrounded the body of Ali Akbar. They looked at Akbar's face and then at Husain's. They knew that their weeping would add to Husain's grief which was already brimful. Ali Akbar's mother went



up to her husband and, with stifled sobs and bent head, she said to him: "My master, I am proud of Akbar for dying such a noble death. He has laid down his life in the noblest cause and this thought will sustain me through the rest of my life. I implore you to pray for me, to pray for all of us, that Almighty Allah may grant us patience and solace." Saying this she turned to the dead body of her son lying on the ground and put her face on his. Zainab and Kulsum, Sakina and Rokayya had all flung themselves on Akbar's body. The tears that were flowing from their eyes were sufficient to wash away the clotted blood from the wounds of Akbar.

Husain sat for a few minutes near the dead body of his son; the son whom he had lost in such tragic circumstances; the son who had died craving for a drop of water to quench his thirst. He felt dazed with grief. He was awakened from his stupor by Qasim, the son of his brother, who had come to seek his permission to go to the battlefield. He rose from the ground, wiped the tears from his aged eyes and muttered "Verily from God we come, and unto Him is our return."

## IV

### The Youths of Karbala

'THE days of our youth are the days of our glory'. What hopes and feelings surge in young hearts during this time of life! How every nerve and sinew quivers with the joy of living! But there are some youths to whom the cup of life is dealt in another measure. There are some budding flowers that are destined to be swept away by the hot desert winds before they have the opportunity to bloom. Such was the destiny of Husain's three nephews who were gathered outside the tents on the eve of that eventful day of Muharram.

Qasim, Aun and Muhammad were gathered to discuss the part they would play on the following day in defence of their uncle. There was grim determination writ large on their young faces. They were watching the progress of the moon as it was marching slowly through that cloudless sky, anxiously waiting for the morrow to unfold its events. Each one of them had the desire to go first into the battlefield to shed his blood. Even the few words they exchanged amongst themselves pertained to their anxiety lest their uncle Husain may hold them back. They were discussing among themselves how to secure the permission of the Imam to march off into the battlefield.

Their talks were interrupted by someone coming and informing Qasim that his mother Umme Farwa wanted him to see her. He hurried to the tent. As soon as he entered it, his mother put her arms round him and said: "Qasim my son, do you know why I called you? I want to remind you about your duty towards your uncle, Husain. I want to tell you something about the unparalleled love and affection Hasan, your father had for Husain. The two of them were so much devoted to each other that they were always thinking and acting in unison. The slightest pain suffered by one was instantaneously felt by the other as if they were twins from the same embryo. With the unique love your father had for Husain, I can well imagine how he, if alive, would have felt today! He would have been the first to sacrifice his life for his beloved younger brother."

She stopped for a few seconds and then, in a soft tone, as if reminiscing, added: "I am sure he wanted you to deputise for him on this day. My child, when he passed away, you were too young to understand life. On his death-bed his last words to me were: "Umme Farwa, I entrust you and my children to God and Husain. When Qasim grows up, you tell him that my dying desire was that he should stand by Husain through thick and thin. I can see the clouds of treachery gathering against Husain. A day may come when he may need the unflinching devotion and sacrifice of his near and dear ones. Though I will not live to see that day, as my last wish I want you to prepare Qasim for it from his childhood." Her voice choked with emotion, as she continued: "My Qasim, since the day your father breathed his last, Husain has looked after you as his own son. Nay, he has treated you on all occasions better than his own sons. You know how he has fulfilled your every wish so that you may not miss the love and affection of your father. Now it is your turn to show that you can repay, to some extent, your debt of gratitude by laying down your life for him before any of his sons, brothers and kinsmen. Now is your chance to reciprocate his love and affection, by demonstrating to the enemies that you are a scion of the House of Ali and can wield the sword in defence of truth."

Qasim listened to his mother with his head bowed in respect. He felt very much relieved by what his mother had said to him because, he had felt very apprehensive as to how his mother would react when he approached her for her permission to go for the fight. He knew how his mother was attached to him after his father's death. He was well aware how restless she used to become, if she would not see him even for a few hours. He had thought that the very idea of her son marching out into the battlefield would make her demented. He felt as if his mother had taken a load off his head. He affectionately hugged her and said: "My dearest mother, I know not how I can thank you for what you have said to me just now. My filial affection for my uncle Husain is known to you. From my childhood I have not known what a father's love means but I know this for certain that even my father, if alive, would not have been so kind, so considerate, so affectionate to me as my uncle Husain has been to me. He has not allowed me to feel even for a moment that I am an orphan. Thanks to him, in the house my every wish has been a

command. How is it possible for me, the son of Hasan, to be oblivious of my obligations to him? For me death would be far better than life without him and my dear uncle Abbas, and my cousins Ali Akbar, Muhammad and others."

Umme Farwa felt elated at the brave reply of her brave son. A painful thought passed her mind—the thought that this dear child who was so devoted to her and in whom she had reposed all her hopes, would perish on the fields of Karbala. With great efforts she controlled herself.

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On the departure of Qasim, Aun and Muhammad waited for some time for him to return. Then both of them returned to their tent to console their mother, Zainab, whose grief and sorrow defied description. As they entered the tent they saw her sitting on the ground with a candle in her hand looking intently at Ali Akbar, their cousin, whom she had brought up as her own son and for whom her love and affection was without a parallel. When she saw both of them entering the tent, she beckoned to them to come and sit near Ali Akbar. Both of them did so according to her bidding. She turned towards them and said in a low tone: "My children, do you know what tomorrow has in store for us? It will be a day of trial; it will be a day when the blood of our family will flow like water; it will be a day on which all the vendetta nurtured by the enemies of the Prophet's house for all these years will be spilled out. I want both of you, my beloved sons, to defend your uncle Husain and his children at the cost of your lives." After a pause she added: "When I was leaving Mecca, your father Abdullah asked me to take both of you with me so that, if an occasion arose you Aun, could be the deputy of your father in seeking martyrdom, and you Muhammad, could be my offering in the cause of Islam."

Hearing their mother talk in this vein touched both of them to the quick. How could they tell their mother Zainab that they were fully prepared for the doom that awaited them; that they were both coveting martyrdom in defence of the cause of Islam and its inviolable principles for which Husain stood up so boldly and firmly in the face of odds! Aun was the first to speak. His voice was quivering with emotion when he said: "Mother, we both feel so elated to know that we have your permission to fight in defence of our uncle and his family. God willing, we

both will show the army of Amr Saad that we are the grandsons of Jaafar-e-Tayyar whose prowess in battle had become legendary. We shall offer such fight tomorrow that, whenever you will remember us and mourn for us, your grief will be mingled with pride that we lived up to the reputation of our family."

Hardly had Aun concluded when Muhammad, the younger one, burst out saying, "My loving mother, do not think that we need any exhortation to fight valiantly tomorrow. I am itching to go out in defence of my uncle. From my childhood I have been hearing about the valour of my maternal grandfather Ali, and paternal grandfather Jaafar-e-Tayyar. It is not for nothing that we both of us have learnt the art of single combat from our uncle Abbas. You may rest assured that, so long as we breathe, we shall not let the least harm come to our uncle Husain or to any of his children."

With this reply of the brave youngsters Zainab felt reassured. It was not that she, for a moment, doubted their devotion or sense of duty. It was not that she considered it necessary to instill any courage in them, for she knew that both of them were brave and noble sons of a brave and noble father. Her love for her brave sons was surging within her. She was feeling as if her heart was getting squeezed when she was conjuring up the vision of these youths dying as martyrs.

Ali Akbar who was listening quietly to the talk between the mother and the two sons, looked at the faces of the mother and then at the sons. With a faint smile playing on his lips he said: "We of the Prophet's family will go out to meet death as is our wont. In what order it will be, it is for God to determine." When he said this, perhaps he had the conviction that Husain would never allow his nephews to die so long as he, Ali Akbar was there. How rightly he had surmised, the events of Ashura would show!

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Like all passing things, that night also passed away to become a chapter of history. The day dawned and with it began the gory events which make mankind, who have the vestiges of humanity, tremble with rage and grief. As Ali Akbar had surmised that night, when the turn of members of the family came, Husain came over to him and, with his hand on his heart, said to him: "My son, go forward to fulfil your appointed task." Much as Zainab and Umme Farwa protested that, so long as their sons

lived, they could not think of Ali Akbar laying down his life, much as Abbas pleaded to let him be the first among the Hashimites to die fighting, Husain insisted that he would send Ali Akbar as his own representative to be the first among his kinsmen. Ali Akbar went to the battlefield never to return from it.

Zainab was disconsolate on Ali Akbar's death. Now Aun and Muhammad were hovering round Husain with entreaties to let them go. Qasim was no less vehement in his supplication for the Imam's permission to die on the battlefield. To Qasim's repeated requests his uncle's reply was: "My dear child, how can I permit you to go when I know for certain that death awaits those who venture out. Your father, my beloved Hasan, had entrusted you to my care on his death-bed. My heart trembles at the very thought of sending you into the jaws of death."

This reply of Husain broke Qasim's heart. He thought that his uncle would not under any circumstances allow him to share the fate of the other martyrs. With tears in his eyes he stood there, not knowing what to do to secure Husain's permission.

At that moment Zainab came over to her brother. With folded hands she said to Husain, "My dearest brother, in my whole life I have never asked you for a favour. Now, for the first time, I am requesting you to grant me one wish; let my sons follow in the footsteps of Ali Akbar."

Husain looked at Zainab and then at her sons. With his head bent, he replied; "Zainab; my dearest sister, I find it impossible to deny your first and last request, though my granting it makes my heart sink within me." Turning to Aun and Muhammad he said: "My dear children, go forward and fulfil your heart's desire to die like heroes. I shall soon be joining you on your journey to eternity."

At this reply the two young heroes felt delighted in the midst of unbounded sorrows. They fell at their mother's feet and asked her for her blessings. Zainab's grief at the parting with these beloved children found its way through her tears which were now pouring from her eyes in torrents. She felt an urge to clasp her young sons to her bosom before they marched out on their last journey; but for fear that such display of emotion may unnerve them, she held back. She could not say anything

to them in farewell. With suppressed sobs she whispered to them: "My beloved ones, may God be with you and may He grant you quick relief from the agonies that you are to endure. It is Zainab's lot to endure ignominies with no brothers, no nephews, no sons to console her. My last request to you is to fight bravely and to die bravely so that, in the midst of my unbearable sufferings in captivity, I may at least have one remembrance to console me—your bravery in the face of overwhelming odds."

She mutely watched her sons mounting their horses assisted by Husain. Her lips were moving in silent prayers; her eyes were following the horses as they galloped out into the arena. When they both got out of sight, with a sigh she sat on the sand near her tent as if lost in a reverie.

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When Qasim saw that Aun and Muhammad had been granted permission to march out on the entreaties of their mother, he rushed to his mother's tent. Almost sobbing with disappointment, he told Umme Farwa that Aun and Muhammad had secured the Imam's permission on the intercession of their mother but he had nobody to plead on his behalf with his uncle. In utter despondency he said; "If I am not destined to be a martyr on this day, life has no charm left for me. Am I destined to be a captive and led through the streets to a prison cell?"

Seeing Qasim so bitter and dejected Umme Farwa burst into tears of grief. Controlling herself she began to think what to do to get Husain's permission for him. Her first reaction was to go over to the Imam and to implore him as his brother's widow and seek permission for Qasim. However, in a flash she remembered her husband's words to her shortly before his death. He had told her that for Qasim a time may come when he would find himself in the trough of despair and despondency and feel dejected and depressed beyond description. He had told her that, when this happened, she should deliver to him an envelope wherein he had kept a letter specially for this occasion. This she had carefully preserved and kept with her as her most cherished thing in a box. Fortunately for her, she had brought the box with her. She hastened to fetch the letter and handing over the envelope to Qasim she said: "Qasim your present plight brought back to me your father's words that a day like this would come for you and when this happened, I should deliver the letter to you. With

rekindled hope and expectation Qasim took the letter from his mother's hand and opened it. In it he found two letters—one addressed to Qasim and the other addressed to Husain.

He anxiously opened the letter meant for him and read it aloud for his mother's benefit. Hasan had written in it: "My child, when this letter reaches you, I will be no more. When you will read it, you will find yourself torn with a conflict between your desire to do your duty and fulfil your obligations and demonstrate your love and esteem for your uncle, and his love and affection for you compelling him to hold you back. My Qasim, I have provided for this event by arming you with a letter for my dearest brother Husain. You may deliver the letter to Husain so that he may grant you your heart's desire. There is much that I could say for this occasion but when you will read this, you will find that time separating us is not long. So hurry along, my child, as I am waiting for you with open arms to welcome you."

When he had completed reading the letter, Qasim felt choked with emotion. His mother also stood speechless with feelings surging in her heart. Both were thinking in unison how loving and thoughtful it was of Hasan to provide a solution for their dilemma. Qasim reverentially bent on the letter and kissed it. The tears rolling from his eyes fell on the writing but, instead of smearing the lettering, they lent glitter to them.

Umme Farwa was the first to get out of the reverie. She broke the silence and said: "My dearest Qasim, now that your father has come to your rescue even in death, take his letter to your uncle Husain. I have no doubt that now he will not be able to refuse you his permission for laying down your life."

Qasim could now hardly contain himself. He rushed towards the tent of Imam Husain with the letter in his hands. He found Husain standing outside Zainab's tent looking intently towards the battlefield. Abbas was by his side and Zainab was standing near the door holding up the curtain and looking at the faces of Husain and Abbas. Qasim knew that they were all watching the combats of Aun and Muhammad. How could he disturb his uncle at such a time? He stood quietly by the side of Husain and Abbas and gazed in the direction of the army pitted against his two young cousins. He could see from clouds of dust rising in the far

distance that one of them had gone ahead of the other. Not so far away he could see the younger one, Muhammad, battling against a number of enemy soliders clustered round him.

Hardly a few minutes had passed in watching the battle, when they saw Aun falling from his horse and giving a cry to his uncle to come to him and carry his body. Husain, who had already borne the afflictions of his companions' death and the loss of his dearest son, Ali Akbar, seemed to wince as if he had received a stab in his chest. He turned to Zainab to see her reaction on hearing her sons' last cry. Abbas and Qasim rushed to her side to hold her. As if this blow was not enough, Muhammad also fell from his horse mortally wounded and similarly shouted to Husain to come to him. Abbas and Qasim knew that for Husain to reach his dying nephews, one after the other, was too trying even for a person of his mettle who had right through the morning performed this task himself. Abbas wanted to accompany Husain and assist him in bringing the dead brothers to the camp, leaving Qasim to attend to Zainab who had collapsed with grief and sorrow on hearing the parting cry of Muahmmad. But Husain beckoned to him to remain with Zainab. Qasim tried to follow him but Husain asked him also to remain near Zainab and console her.

Husain first reached the place where Muhammad was lying mortally wounded. He bent over his body to find that, on account of loss of blood, his young life was ebbing fast. The child was gasping heavily. His throat was so parched that even with great efforts he was not able to speak clearly. Husain put his ear near Muhammad's mouth. In a faint, faltering voice the young lad said: "My last salutations to you uncle. Tell my mother that I have lived upto her expectations and am dying bravely as she and my father wanted me. Give my last salaams to her and console her as much as you can." The efforts made by the child in saying these words appeared to exhaust him. He added after a few seconds: "I heard the cry of Aun before I fell. Now that I am beyond any help, uncle, please go over to him and see if you can do something for him before it is too late." Hardly he had said these words, <sup>when</sup> his life became extinct. Husain was beside himself with grief. But he could not remain there long as he had to go over to Aun. He rushed in the direction where Aun had fallen. On reaching his body he found that he had breathed his last. He picked up his lifeless body and pressed it to his heart.

With a heavy tread, with tears flowing in torrents, the aged uncle began his march towards the camp with the body of his nephew in his arms. Abbas came rushing from the camp towards him and said, "Let me carry Aun's body to the morgue and you take Muhammad's body. My master, Abbas is still alive to share your burden and grief." Quietly he handed over Aun's corpse to Abbas and went over to pick up Muhammad's body. The two brothers, one old and one young, were each carrying the body of a young nephew. The sight was such as to evoke sorrow and grief in the hearts of the most hard-hearted persons.

On reaching their camp Husain and Abbas laid the bodies of Aun and Muhammad on the ground. Zainab who was waiting for them came over and fell on the two bodies of her sons. "My sons, my sons," she cried, "What mother is there to send her beloved ones to meet death as I have sent mine." Her face was bathed in tears. With sobs she was saying: "My darlings, you have gone from this world with your thirst unquenched. Your grandfather Ali will be there to quench your thirst in heaven. My beloved sons, for Zainab there is still a long, weary, unending future to face without you two to lighten the burden with your brave talk." Overpowered by her grief and emotions she fell unconscious on the dead bodies.

Husain, Abbas, Qasim and the ladies who were all standing and crying by her side, gently picked up Zainab and took her to her tent. They all knew that in such a great tragedy as had befallen her, all words of consolation would only be in vain.

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As was the practice of Yazid's army, they started beating the drums on the slaughter of the two young nephews of Husain, to herald their victory. When the beating of drums stopped, they raised the usual cry challenging the young defenders of Husain to come out into the field to face death. Now Qasim came over to Husain, who was standing near Zainab's prostrate form with his head bent. Qasim could not muster sufficient strength to say what he had come to convey to the Imam. He quietly handed over the letter of his father for Husain which he had found in the envelope given to him by his mother. Husain glanced at the handwriting on the letter and at once recognised it as his late lamented brother's.

With surprise he opened the letter and eagerly read it. As he read it on, he could not control himself and burst into a cry of grief. In the letter it was written: "My beloved Husain, when this letter will be read by you, you will be surrounded by sorrows on all sides, with dead bodies of your near and dear ones strewn round you. I will not be there to lay down my life for you, Husain, but I am leaving behind my Qasim to be my deputy on this day. Husain, I beseech you not to reject my offering. In the name of love that you bear for me, I implore you to let Qasim go forth and die in your defence. Dearest brother, in spirit I am with you, watching your heroic sacrifices and sharing your woes and affliction."

Hasan's letter brought back to Husain the memories of his dear brother to whom he was devoted and he wept copiously recollecting his love and affection. What unique love Hasan had for him that, though dead, he had left this deputy in Qasim for this day!

With effort Hussain controlled himself and turned to Qasim saying: "Dear child, your father's wishes, which I regard as commands for me, leave me no other alternative. March on, Qasim, as your father wished you to do. If it is so ordained that I may bear the wound of your martyrdom, I shall bow to the Will of God."

Qasim bowed reverentially and hurried to his mother Umme Farwa, who was sitting dazed with grief on receiving the sad news of Aun and Muhammad's martyrdom. As Qasim entered her tent, she raised her head and looked at him expectantly. She could see from the look of satisfaction on his grief-stricken face that he had received Husain's permission for which he had been begging so long. An exchange of looks between the mother and son confirmed to Umme Farwa that she was right. Slowly she rose and said to Qasim: "My beloved son, all these years I have been waiting for the day when you would become a bridegroom, and dressed as a groom, come to receive my blessings. It seems that fate has decreed otherwise. Qasim, I have preserved the dress your father wore on the day of his marriage with me. I had hoped that, on your wedding day, I would ask you to wear it. Now that you are going to the land of no return, my wish is that you put on that dress so that my desire to see you dressed as a groom may be fulfilled." After a pause she continued in a reflective tone: "It is the custom for grooms to apply henna on their hands. Though

I have none with me, I know that you will not need it. Your hands will be dyed with your own blood." With these words she kissed her sons' cheeks and embraced him. It was a long embrace, the embrace of a mother who knew that she was seeing her young darling for the last time in this world. Holding him tightly in her arms she was looking longingly at his face, as if she wanted to let his image sink into her mind's eye for ever. All partings are sad but where the parting is for ever, and in such circumstances, what words can describe it?

The mother and son tore themselves from each other lest their surging love and attachment might make their parting impossible. Umme Farwa brought out the wedding garments of Hasan for Qasim to wear. Dressed in these clothes Qasim was looking the very image of Hasan. The son, followed by the mother, went over to Zainab's tent to bid her goodbye. Hardly had Zainab recovered from the swoon, in her dazed mind she thought for a moment that Hasan was coming to her. So much did Qasim resemble his father in that dress that Zainab almost thought that Hasan had descended from heaven to defend his brother. It was just a flitting thought which passed away like lightning. She realised that it was Qasim who had come to her to pay his last respects. She looked at him and then at his mother who was following him. She realised with what efforts Umme Farwa was controlling her feelings. Much as her own heart was bursting with grief at this parting with her beloved brother's son, she knew that it was essential for her to control herself for the sake of Umme Farwa. With one hand on her head and the other on her heart, she came forward to bid adieu to Qasim. With hot tears rolling down her cheeks she kissed Qasim on his forehead saying: "Qasim, my dear child, your aged aunt had hoped that you, my dear ones, would carry my funeral bier. But it is written in Zainab's luck that she should see the young lives of her dearest ones extinguished before her. It has fallen to my lot to see you all dead before me and to carry your memories for the rest of my dreary, unending days. March on my child with the name of God."

Qasim came to Husain and reverentially kissed his hands. Seeing Qasim so keenly resembling Hasan, his dear, departed brother Husain wept bitterly. He kissed Qasim on his cheeks and held the horse for him to mount. Abbas came forward to do this service but Husain would

not let him do so. "This is the last occasion for me to give a send-off to my Qasim and let me do this for him." He turned to Qasim and said: "Qasim, I shall not be long in joining you."

Reaching the battle arena, Qasim addressed the enemy with an eloquence which reminded many of the sermons of his grandfather Ali. With gaping mouths they were transfixed to the ground at his words of admonition on the betrayal of the Imam. Amr Ibne Saad ordered his men to challenge him to single combat, fearing that this youth's eloquence may rouse the vestiges of goodness in some of his men. Qasim fought battles with several of them and threw them from their horses as if he were a seasoned warrior and not a youth of 14, with three day's thirst and hunger. Such was his skill with the sword and horsemanship that Husain, who was watching his nephew's fight from a hillock near his camp, burst into spontaneous acclamation. Now no warrior from the enemy ranks was coming forward to meet the challenge of this brave son of Hasan. He was now repeatedly challenging the soldiers of Amr Saad to come forward and match their skill and swordsmanship against him in single combat. Amr Saad, seeing that none of his warriors was prepared for this, ordered his soldiers to attack Qasim together. It was now a fight between one and thousands, if such a thing can at all be called a fight. How long could Qasim ward off the attacks of swords, spears, daggers and arrows coming at him from all directions? He was wounded from head to foot. When he saw that he could no longer remain in the saddle, he gave a cry offering his last salutations to his uncle Husain.

Husain, who was watching from a distance the dastardly attack of the multitude of soldiers on his helpless Qasim, heard this cry full of agony and pain. He felt as if he had himself received all the wounds inflicted on Qasim. He unsheathed his sword and, like an enraged lion, he rushed towards the battle-field. With sword in one hand he galloped his horse cutting through the enemy hordes. Such was the fury of his charge that the enemy were reminded of the charges of Ali, his father, in the battle of Siffin, when the ~~God~~ God had singly scattered the enemy, running through them like a knife through butter, and killing hundreds with the dexterous sweeps of his sword. For safety ~~lies~~ of the arrant cowards ran helter-skelter to save their contemptible lives. The stampede of Yazid's soldiers was such that the body of Qasim was trampled under the feet of hundreds of minions who were

a disgrace to their calling. When the battlefield was cleared of the cowards and Husain reached the body of Qasim, he found that it was torn to pieces. What feelings this gruesome sight evoked in Husain's heart can better be imagined than described. Husain stumbled down from his horse and fell to the ground exclaiming: "My God, what have these cowards done to my Qasim." For some time he wept with such agony that his body convulsed. After a while he took off his robe and started picking up pieces of Qasim's body. One by one he put them all in his robe and, lifting the bundle, put it on his aged shoulders and mounted the horse. As he did so, he muttered: "My Qasim, your mother had sent you out dressed as a groom. Now you are returning to your mother with your body cut to pieces." As he was marching back towards his camp, Husain was disconsolately exclaiming: "My God, has there been an instance where an uncle had to carry his own nephew's body in such a state!"

One reaching the camp Husain put down the body on the ground. He called Abbas and asked him to bring Umme Farwa and his sisters Zainab and Kulsum to the morgue. He beseeched Fizza, his mother's devoted maid, to console Umme Farwa and Zainab, for he knew that the condition of Qasim's body might give them such a shock as would kill them.

Qasim's mother came with Zainab on one side and Umme Kulsum on the other. Fizza went over to the ladies and said: "I beseech you, in the name of my lady Fatima, to muster all the strength and courage you can to see Qasim's remains. His mortal remains may be torn and cut to pieces but remember his soul is now with my lady and Hasan, who must have welcomed him with open arms." Saying this, she opened the robe and unfolded the body. Zainab held her aching heart, Kulsum held her reeling head and Umme Farwa fell with a shriek and fainted.

What pen can narrate the grief of a mother who has lost her only son? What words can describe the agony of a mother's loving heart on seeing her son in such a state? The land of Karbala was echoing the cries of the ladies and the wailing of the children on Qasim's death. Can any one attempt to depict what was Husain's plight at that time? Resting his head on Abbas's shoulders, Husain was saying: "My God, my God if my enemies wanted to kill me, they could do so; but what my dear ones have done that they slay them so mercilessly?"



Husain stood there, for some time as if in a trance. He was brought back to the reality of the situation by Abbas who softly said to him: "My master now let me go, as others have done. I am now the commander of soliders who are no more." Husain for a moment did not reply. Then he softly muttered: 'Verily we come from God and unto Him we shall return.'

## V

## Abbas—The Standard-Bearer of Husain

THE shifting sand-dunes of Karbala were smeared with blood. Near one of such dunes, on the bank of Alkoma, lay the prostrate figure of a youth with blood gushing out from innumerable wounds. The crimson life-tide was ebbing fast. Even so, it seemed as if he was anxiously expecting somebody to come to him, to be near him before he breathed his last. Through his parched throat he was feebly calling somebody. Yes, Abbas was anxiously expecting his master to come to him before he parted with his life, as he had come to the side of all his devoted friends who had laid down their dear lives for him and in espousing his cause.

It is said that before a man's death all the past events of his life pass before his mind's eye in a flash-back. In his last moments Abbas was seeing the events of his past life. He was seeing himself as a child in Medina following Husain with a devotion which was considered unique even for a brother. He was seeing the events of that hot and sultry day in Kufa when his illustrious father ALI was addressing a congregation in the mosque and he, as a child, with his characteristic devotion, was looking at the face of his beloved brother watching him intently so that he could attend to his wishes as if an instant command. Seeing from the parched lips of Husain that he was feeling extremely thirsty, how he had darted out from the mosque and returned with a tumbler full of cool, refreshing water and in the hurry to carry the water as quickly as possible to quench the consuming thirst of his dearest brother, how he had spilled water on his own clothes. He was recalling how this incident had made his illustrious father stop in the midst of his speech, with tears rolling down his cheeks at the sight of his young son all wet with water. He was remembering his father's reply to the queries from his faithful followers as to what had brought tears in his eyes, that Abbas who had wetted his body with water in the process of quenching Husain's thirst would, in the not too distant future, wet his body with his own blood in attempting to

quench the thirst of his young children. He was vividly seeing the scene on the 21st Ramazan, way back in 40 Hijra, when his father, mortally wounded, was lying on his death-bed and entrusting his children and dependents to the care of his eldest brother, Hasan—all except him. Seeing that his father had commended all but him to the care of Hasan—how he, a child of 12 had burst out into uncontrollable tears. His father, on hearing him sobbing, had called him to his side and given his hand in Husain's hand with the words: "Husain, this child I am entrusting to you. He will represent me on the day of your supreme sacrifice and lay down his life in defending you and your dear ones, much as I would have done if alive on that day." How his father had turned to him and affectionately told him: "Abbas, my child, I know your unbounded love for Husain. Though you are too young to be told about it, when that day dawns, consider no sacrifice too great for Husain and his children." He saw before his mind's eye that parting with his aged mother Fatima in Medina. How she had affectionately embraced him and reminded him of the dying desire of his father to lay down his life in the defence of Husain and his dear ones.

A faint smile of satisfaction flickered for a brief moment on his parched lips—a smile of satisfaction that he had fulfilled his father's wish; that he had performed his duty for which he was brought up. It just flitted for a moment and vanished as other scenes came before his mind's eye. He was re-living the events of the night before. He was seeing Shimr stealthily coming to him and talking to him about his ties of relationship; about the protection he had been promised for Abbas by the Commander of Yazid's forces, only if he would leave Husain and go over to Yazid's camp; about the promises of riches and rewards that he would get; how he had spurned the suggestion of Shimr with the utmost disdain to the chargin of that servile minion who had sold his soul for a mess of pottage. How he had scared away that coward by his scathing rage saying: "You worshipper of Mammon, do not think that Abbas will be lured by your tempting offer of power and pelf. If I die in defending my master, Husain, I shall consider myself the luckiest person. Oh coward, remember that valiants die but once. Nobody is born to live eternally. By betraying my master, you have betrayed the Prophet, whose religion you profess to follow. On the Day of Judgment you will be doomed to eternal

perdition. I am ashamed to own any relationship with you. Had it not been for the fact that you have come here unarmed, I would have given you the chastisement you deserve for your impudence in asking me to become a turncoat." How that wretch had scampered from there seeing him roaring like an enraged lion! The thought of that unpleasant interlude contracted his brows. Or was it the excruciating pain he was suffering on account of the deep gashes he had all over his body?

Yet another scene passed before Abbas's eyes, Sakina leading 42 children, each with a dry water-bag. The children were shouting as if in chrous—"thirst, consuming thirst, is killing us." Sakina coming to him and putting her dry water-bag at his feet and saying to him: "O uncle, I know you will do something to get water for us. Even if you can bring one bag full of water, we can wet our parched throats." He could see that thirst, aggravated by the scorching heat of the desert, was squeezing their young lives out of them. The sight of these young kids had moved him more than any other soul-stirring events of that fateful day. How he had picked up the water-bag with assurances to Sakina that he would go and bring water—God Willing. How he had taken Husain's permission and marched out of the camp with a sword in one hand, the flag in the other, and the bag on his shoulder, with the children following him in a group upto the outer-perimeter of the camp! How Husain had repeatedly requested him to avoid fighting as much as possible and confine himself to the task of bringing water!

His thoughts switched over to the events that had preceded his fall from the horse. With the thought of procuring water for his dear little Sakina, he had charged on the enemy who held the river banks. He had run through the enemy ranks like a knife through butter. Against his surging onslaught the enemy could not stand and had run helter-skelter shouting for protection. For a moment it seemed as if Ali, the Lion of God, had descended from heaven. In no time Abbas was near the rivulet. He had jumped down from the horse and bent to fill the water-bag. When it was filled to the brim, he had taken some water in his cupped hand to drink and satisfy his killing thirst. But, on second thought, he had thrown the water away. How could he drink water when Sakina and the children were still withering without water? How could he be so callous as to forget that his master, Husain had not had a drop of water since

the last 3 days! He had turned to his horse which had been let loose so that it could satiate its thirst. The animal had been intently looking at its master as if to say: "I too am aware that, so long as our master and his children remain without water, our thirst cannot be quenched."

With the water-bag filled he had jumped on the horseback with one thought uppermost in his mind—to get the water for the anxiously waiting children as quickly as possible. Seeing him galloping towards the camp of Husain, the enemy had turned. Somebody had shouted from the enemy ranks that if Husain and his people got water, it would be difficult to fight them on the battlefield. Though it was an uneven fight, he fought them with valour which was so characteristic of his father's. Though he was thirsty and hungry, he charged on them and scattered them. The mercenaries of Yazid were running like lambs in a fold when charged by a lion. Seeing that a frontal assault on a man so brave was not possible, they had resorted to a barrage of arrows. When arrows were coming from all sides, Abbas had only one thought in his mind—how to protect the water-bag? To him it seemed more important to protect the water-bag than his life. Seeing that Abbas was preoccupied with this thought, one treacherous foe, hiding behind a sand-dune, had rushed out and dealt a blow on his right hand and cut it off. In a flash Abbas had transferred his sword to his left hand and the standard he was bearing he had hugged to his chest. Now that the lion of Ali was crippled, the foes had found courage to surround him. A blow from an enemy's sword severed his left arm. The odds were now mounting against him. He held the bag with his teeth and protected the flag with his bent chest on the horseback. Now the paramount thought in his mind was to reach the camp somehow or the other. A silent prayer had escaped his lips: "Merciful Allah, spare me long enough to fulfil my mission." But that was not to be. An arrow had pierced the water-bag and water had started gushing out of it. Was it water that was flowing out of that bag or the hopes of Abbas? All his efforts had been in vain. After all Sakina's thirst would remain unsatisfied and all her hopes would be frustrated. The enemies who had made bold to surround him, now seeing his helpless condition, were now gathering thick round him. One of them came near him and struck a mortal blow with an iron mace. He reeled over and fell from the horse where he was lying.

He tossed on the burning sand with excruciating pain. He felt that life was fast ebbing out but his wish to see his master had remained unfulfilled. With one last effort, with all the strength that was left in him, he shouted: "O my master, do come to me before I die." As if in answer to his prayers he felt some footsteps near him. Yes, his instinct told him that it was his lord. His one eye had been blinded by an arrow and the other filled with blood and so he could not see. But he felt his master kneeling down beside him, lifting his head and taking it into his lap. Not a word was said for a few seconds because both were choked with emotion. At last he heard Husain's voice, a half-sob, half-muffled cry: "Abbas, my brother, what have they done to you?" If Abbas could see, would he have recognised his master? With back bent and beard turned white and hoary, on hearing the parting cry of his beloved brother, Husain's plight was such that nobody could have recognised him—such was his transformation. Abbas was now feeling the loving touch of his master's hand. With effort he muttered: "You have come at last, my Master. I thought I was not destined to have a last look at you but, thank God, you are here." With these words he put his head on the sand. Tenderly Husain lifted his head and again put it on his lap, enquiring why he had removed it from there. "My Master," replied Abbas, "the thought that when you will be breathing your last, nobody will be there to put your head in the lap and to comfort you, makes me feel that it would be better if my head lies on the sand when I die, just as yours would be. Besides, I am your slave and you are my master. It is too much for me to put my head on your lap." Husain burst into uncontrollable tears. The sight of his brother, whose name was to become a byword for devotion and unflinching faithfulness, laying down his dear life in his arms, was heart-rending.

Abbas was heard to whisper softly: "My master, I have some last wishes to express. When I was born, I had first look at your face and it is my last desire that when I die, my gaze may be on your face. My one eye is pierced by an arrow and the other is filled with blood. If you will clear the eye, blood from my one I'll be able to see you and fulfil my last dying desire. My second wish is that when I die you may not carry my body to the camp. I had promised to bring water to Sakina and, since I have failed in my attempt to bring her water, I cannot face her even in

death. Besides, I know that the blows that you have received since morning have all but crushed you and, carrying my body to the camp, will be a heart-breaking work for you. And my third wish is that Sakina may not be brought here to see my plight. I know with what love and affection she was devoted to me. The sight of my dead body lying here will kill her."

Husain sobbingly promised him that he would carry out his last wishes and added: "Abbas, I too have a wish to be fulfilled. Since childhood you have always called me master. For once at least call me brother with your dying breath." The blood was cleared from the eye, one brother looked at the other with a longing lingering look. Abbas was heard to whisper: "My brother, my brother" and with these words he surrendered his soul to his Maker: Husain fell unconscious on the dead body of Abbas with a cry: "O Abbas, who is left to protect me and Sakina after you."

The flow of Furat became dark as winter and a murmur arose from the flowing water as if to protest against the killing of a thirsty water-bearer on its banks.

ANJUMAN-E CHUMMAH BACHAR

DR. AHMED

KARACHI

## IV

### From Cradle to the Grave

THE mother was looking intently into the face of her child lying in the cradle. It was a face which had become ashen-pale on account of starvation. The child, although about 10 months old, was so emaciated that any person beholding it would think that it was hardly 6 months old. The child's eyes appeared to be searching for something. As if to indicate what it wanted, the child was opening its mouth and taking out its parched tongue and turning it on its lips. The mother was sitting and watching, helplessly waiting for death to come to the child and relieve it of the agony. But what mother can bear to see her child die of starvation and what is worse thirst unquenched? Could she not do something to get a few drops of water which could well become the life saving elixir for the child? But where could she get these few drops of precious water which her lord, Imam Husain, and his near and dear ones were denied by the army of Yazid for 3 days? Her heart was revolting against the idea of letting her young son die of thirst. For one day she had nursed the child at her breast but, as she herself had gone without the essential nourishments for so long, her milk had dried up completely and there was not a drop that she could give to the child. Not far away, the rivulet was gushing by and murmur of its rippling waters could be heard in the stillness that pervaded those afternoon hours.

A passing thought came into the mother's mind to take up the child in her arms and go out—to run to the river and snatch some water to quench the child's thirst. But it was just a flitting thought which she rejected on considering what her husband, Imam Husain, would say and feel. Would not such action on her part in going out with the child, cause great agony to her lord? Had he not suffered enough during the day losing his friends and members of his family, one after the other, bringing their dead bodies to the morgue? She recalled how this child's sister, Fatima Sughra, had pleaded with her in Medina to leave him behind with her so that she could pass her days in the company of the child. She remembered how this child, Ali Asghar, had clung to his sister and would

not go to anybody till her lord had come over and whispered something into its ears. What were the words which Hussin had whispered to Ali Asghar in Medina, when he was in his sister's arms, she did not know but she distinctly recollected the child's coming over with a smile from his sister's arms into his fathers' outstretched arms. What a contrast the smiling face of Ali Asghar, barely 6 months old at that time, presented to the attenuated and emaciated face of the child lying in the cradle before her!

Every minute that was passing was increasing the agony of the child and grief of the mother. Umme Rabab did not know what she could do except watch the child dying by inches. She was just getting reconciled to this thought when the child, with one desperate attempt, lifted itself and came into Umme Rabab's arms. Though unable to cry through sheer weakness, Ali Asghar uttered a heart-rending moan which tore asunder the helpless mother's heart. She clasped the child to her bosom and stood motionless. She heard a rustling noise behind her and, turning round, she saw Imam Husain entering the tent. Seeing him she could no longer contain herself and rushed towards him saying, "Sire, my innocent son is dying of thirst. For God's sake do something to save him." Imam Husain looked at her and then at the child. He could see how true her apprehensions were. After a moment's thinking he said to her: "Umme Rabab, give Ali Asghar to me. As a last attempt, I shall take him in my arms and appeal to the army of Yazid to give him a few drops of water to save his innocent life." Overjoyed at the thought of her son getting some water, Umme Rabab immediately put Ali Asghar in Imam Husain's arms saying: "Sire, go quickly, for time is most precious for saving my son's life. May God help you in getting some water for him. When you take him out into the scorching sun, do cover him up with your robe, because, in his present condition, he might wither away like a flower in the blaze outside." Husain took the child in his arms, covered him with his robe and went out of the tent. The mother followed him till the exit and stood there watching him go towards the army.

The soliders of Yazid saw Husain coming towards them, his back bent, his body wounded, his beard turned completely white with sorrow and grief in the span of a few hours. They saw him bringing something held under his robe. Many thought that Husain was bringing the Holy

Quran to plead with them that the conflict between him and Yazid be resolved by the arbitrament of this Holy Book. He walked towards them and stood at a shouting distance and, when he felt that they could see him clearly, he removed his robe which was covering Ali Asghar. He held the child high in his hands and, in a loud and ringing voice, he said: "O soldiers of Kufa and Damascus, I came to this place at the invitation of your people to preach to them the principles of Islam. Instead of treating me and my people as your guests, you betrayed us and denied us even water for the last 3 days. You have killed my loyal friends, my nephews, brothers and son. If in your warped judgment we had committed a crime, by not bowing to the will of the tyrant Yazid, whom you have accepted as your spiritual lord, my young son, whom I am holding before you, has not committed any sin, because he is just an infant. For the last 3 days he has not had any nourishment—not even water. He is now dying of thirst. Islam is the religion which you profess to follow and, in the name of Islam, I appeal to you to give a little water to my innocent son to save his life. I am sure many of you must be hav.ing young children of his age. I implore you, for the love of your children, not to let this child die of thirst." Saying this, he turned to the child in his hands and said: "Ali Asghar, my son, I wish you could tell them to what state your thirst has reduced you." As if in response to this, Ali Asghar opened his mouth and started turning his tongue, which had become bone-dry on his parched lips.

Husain's words and Ali Asghar's mute appeal for water had a magic effect even on the heartless mercenaries who were arrayed against them. Many soldiers recalled the faces of their own children back home lying contentedly in their cradles, well-fed and well-protected. Their paternal instincts for a moment aroused pity in their hearts for this innocent baby. Some of them, in spite of themselves, could not help shedding tears to hide which they had to turn their faces. Some bold ones amongst them were whispering to one another about going over to the Commander of their army, Amr Saad, and asking him to save the child's life by providing some water for him.

Husain was waiting for the reply to his appeal, with the child in his arms. He felt that another appeal to them might be helpful, so he once again addressed the soldiers of Yazid: "Army of Yazid, some amongst you may be thinking that I am asking for water for the child with the intention

of satisfying my own thirst and the thirst of other children and ladies in my camp. If you think so, let me tell you that, I am incapable of any such ruse. If you do not feel convinced, I am prepared to hand over my son to you, so that you can yourself take him and give him water. I am laying down Ali Asghar on the sand so that any one of you can come and pick him up and return him to me after quenching his thirst." Saying this he spread his robe on the ground and put Ali Asghar on it in full view of the opposite army.

Husain's action had an electrifying effect on many of the soldiers. Some of them felt like going over to Amr Saad, their Commandar, and telling him that he could not deny a few drops of water to the child when Husain had clearly demonstrated that there was no stratagem to get water for himself.

Amr Saad sensed that, if much time elapsed, some of his soldiers might revolt against him—soldiers who had not hesitated to slaughter young Hashimite boys of 12 and 14, but who were now touched to the quick by the mute appeal of this babe, a few months old, for some drops of water. He turned to his ace archer Hurmula, who was standing beside him, and said: "Hurmula, here is the chance for you to earn the best favour of Yazid. You cut short this agonising situation by your arrow. Demonstrate your skill by piercing the throat of the child."

The heartiest archer's greed and cupidity were aroused. He pictured to himself the favours he would gain at the court of Yazid when it would be narrated that he came to the rescue of Amr Saad, when he faced a very delicate situation with many of the young soldiers staging a near revolt on beholding the piteous condition of the hapless and helpless child. Without waiting for a second, he picked up his bow and arrow and took aim at the child. At the same instant Husain picked up the child from the ground. The arrow whizzed past the ground where the child was lying a minute before. Now Ali Asghar was in his father's arms. Seeing that his first arrow had gone waste, Hurmula took out another one and aimed it at the child. An expert marksman though he was, he could not take correct aim as he saw in the distant background near the door of the tent a woman's veiled form. He felt that it must be the mother of the child anxiously and expectantly waiting for the child's return.

The reason for his second arrow missing its mark was that, heartless as he was, he could well realise that, with the piercing of the child's throat, he would be shattering the mother's hopes and heart. Amr Saad, who was watching the two abortive attempts of his best archer, known throughout the kingdom for his expert and unfailing marksmanship, got scared at his failures. He knew full well that every second that elapsed was dangerous for him. He felt that, what the other bold and brave soldiers on Husain's side could not achieve, might be achieved by this little infant in saving the day for the Imam. He, therefore, exhorted Hurmula with all the persuasion he could command, giving him most extravagant promises of reward, to hasten with his third arrow. Little did the wretch need of these because, feeling humiliated and chagrined at his own weakness, he put the third arrow in the bow and taking aim, let it go. It was released with such uncanny accuracy that it found its exact target. It was too big for its target for, how big is the throat of a child a few months old! The arrow not only pierced the throat of Ali Asghar but tore it asunder and dug itself into Imam Husain's arms. Such was its impact that the child's blood gushed forth as if from a fountain and splashed the face of the father.

Husain clasped the dead body of his infant to his chest and, with tears rolling down his cheeks, muttered: "My innocent son, to what depth of degradation these people have sunk that they could not even spare you".

Husain was hesitating for some time what to do after this. He knew that the child's mother was waiting for him to bring it back to her. What if she asked him whether he had got water for him? If he told her that the enemies had killed him with an arrow, would she not ask whether, before killing him, they had quenched the child's thirst? He went forward a few paces and then retraced them. His second thought was to bury the child there and then and then go and tell the waiting mother about what had happened. But he rejected this idea, because he realised that the mother would like to have a last look at her dead child's face. But then he thought of the agony the mother would feel when she saw the mangled remains of her child.

Steeling his nerves Imam Husain covered the corpse of the child with his robe in the same way as he had covered it when coming to the

battle-field and walked towards his camp. As soon as he entered it, he saw the anxious mother waiting impatiently.

She looked at his drooping face smeared with blood and saw tears rolling down his cheeks. She understood what he had come to tell her. As soon as he saw her, he said: "Umme Rubab, as your husband and lord, I ask you to make one promise to me. This I am asking from you as my last wish." She quietly said: "Sire, I shall do exactly as you want me to. Tell me what they did to my innocent son, tell me all. Other young warriors of the family died fighting bravely but my helpless child was too young for that. Tell me whether they gave him water before killing him. Even animals are given food and water before they are slaughtered."

Husain whispered: "Rubab, I beseech you not to curse the persons who killed your innocent child so mercilessly. Alas, they did not give him a drop of water. My appeal to them for water for him was replied with an arrow." Saying this, he removed the robe from Ali Asghar's corpse and handed it to Umme Rubab.

Husain's sister Zainab, who had come over there on hearing her brother's voice, saw the mother taking the dead child into her hands, clasping it to her bosom, and then collapse with a piercing shriek. She rushed in to hold Umme Rubab. What mother could see her child in that state and still remain calm and patient!

Zainab called all the ladies of the family to come over and console Umme Rubab. Husain stood there for quite some time lost in thought. He was perhaps remembering all that he had lost in the space of a few hours. Not even his innocent child had been spared by the enemy who, it seemed, were bent upon exterminating the family of the Prophet of Islam, though professedly owing allegiance to him.

He must have waited for some time when Umme Rubab came over to him and said: "Sire, I want my child to be buried by you with your own hands. I know that when you are no more, the enemies will not hesitate to desecrate the dead bodies of the martyrs. I want this child to be spared such defilement after death."

Husain took the child's dead body from the mother's hands, and walked out of the camp. He dug a little grave with his sword with none to

assist him. At such times it is usual for others to attend the burial ceremony but Husain had none with him who could lend him a helping hand, much less bury the child. He placed the child in the grave and covered it with the earth. It is customary to sprinkle some water over the grave but that was not possible when even in its last hour the child could not get a drop to drink.

Husain sat at the grave with his tears rolling down on the grave. After offering Fateha at the grave, Husain raised his head heavenward and prayed: "O God, Thou art my Witness that I have not faltered in my duty to the last and have given sacrifices of all my dearest ones, including my last one, this my babe-in-arms."



## VII

### The Supreme Sacrifice

HUSAIN was alone, all alone with none to befriend him, none to help him, none to defend him. On the other side was an army of several thousand strong, thirsting for his blood. He was sitting on the sand outside his tent listening to the beating of drums of the enemy punctuated by their battle cry: "Is there any person left to come out and fight with us." Husain wondered whether they were expecting any person to be left or whether their battle cry was just to mock him. Did they not know that all his loyal friends had died fighting valiantly to defend him? Did they not realise that not a soul was left from his brothers, cousins, nephews, sons and his kindred, each one having laid down his life in the few hours between sunrise and the post-noon period? Now there was left only his son Ali Zainal Abedeen, who was confined to bed with fever which had been raging for days and which had so weakened him that he could hardly lift his head, what to talk of walking or marching to the battle-field.

The declining sun was now casting lengthening shadows on the plain of Karbala. It seemed that Husain was waiting for the inevitable hour to come. Perhaps he was waiting till the time for evening prayers so that he could go out into the battle-field after offering his prayers.

The shouts from the enemy's hordes became more and more vociferous. It seemed that now they were clamouring to shed his blood so that, having accomplished their task, they could partake of the feast which their Commander had prepared for them to celebrate their success. Some impatient soldiers came marching towards Husain's camp and shouted: "O Husain, where are your soldiers who were so anxious to protect you and who had sworn to see that no harm came to you so long as any of them lived? Where are your brothers, sons and nephews who had sworn to protect you and to see that nobody raised his voice against yours till any of them breathed?"

Husain was cut to the quick by these taunting words of the enemy. He turned towards the morgue where the dead bodies of his beloved

friends and dear ones were lying and, addressing them, he said: "Where are you, Muslim Ibne Ausaja, Zohair Ibne Qain, Habib Ibne Mazahir, Hur Ibne Riyahi and my other faithful friends? Do you hear the taunts of the enemies? Why don't you respond to my last call for help?" Then, turning towards the dead bodies of his nephews and sons, he cried: "Are you hearing me, O Ali Akbar, Qasim, Aun, Muhammad and my brothers? All of you were ever ready to defend me but now I am all alone and without a friend to help me, to defend me, or even to console me in this hour of trial." Turning then in the direction of the river, where the dead body of his dearest brother Abbas was lying, he cried: "Abbas, my brother, are you hearing my cry for help? Why are you not answering me today? From your childhood you were ever ready to chastise anybody who so much as raised his voice against mine, but today, insults and ignominies are being hurled at me. Why don't you come to my help now?" With these words he wept bitterly and added: "Alas, I know that all of you are sleeping the sweet slumber of death—I know that death has created that barrier which you cannot cross to help me."

With faltering step Husain entered his camp to bid farewell to his sisters, daughters and other ladies of his house. Standing outside his tent he called: "O my sisters Zainab and Umme Kulsum, Umme Laila and Umme Rabab, my daughters Kubra, Rokayya and Sakina and my respected nurse Fizza, come over to me to hear my last salutations and farewell message to you all."

His words drew all the ladies of his family who came rushing in and clustered round him. His dearest sister Zainab put her arms round his neck and, looking straight into his eyes, said: "My dearest brother, is it true that you are going away for the last time, never to be seen alive again? O brother, has that time come, which I was dreading all day long, for you to depart leaving us at the mercy of these heartless hordes?"

With his head bowed, Husain muttered: "Yes, Zainab the time has come for which your mother had prepared you from your childhood, about which your father had spoken to you on his death-bed. For me this parting is saddest, because I know that your real trials and ordeals will not end but only begin today."

"My own brother," replied Zainab, "I was all along hoping against hope that by sacrificing the lives of my sons, Aun and Muhammad, of Abbas, Qasim and Ali Akbar, your life may be spared. Without you, what will be left in this world for me to live for? Brother, when you go to heaven, plead with our grandfather to call me to heaven, to spare me the insults and ignominies that now await me."

For a moment Husain could not reply to Zainab's pleadings, for he knew how true what she said was. Controlling his own emotions, after a few seconds, he said, "Zainab, if you will leave this world so soon, who will fulfil the mission, who will accomplish the task which I am leaving unfinished? I am entrusting to your care my orphans and widows and the orphans and widows of all my brave soldiers and my blood relations. It is now for you to lead them, to look after them, to care for them and to console them. I shall die in peace if you promise me that you will be to them what were all their dear ones, whom they have lost today." He paused for a while and added: "And Zainab, I am particularly commending to your care my son Ali Zainal Abedeen, whom illness has brought to the verge of death, and my beloved daughter Sakina who has never been separated from me even for a day. When she will not see me, she will ask you where I have gone. Console her as best as you can. I remember how she was pleading for water to her uncle Abbas but, ever since his death, she has not uttered a word. When you get water after my death, give it first to her."

With these words Husain seemed to be choked with emotions, but controlling himself he went on: "The enemies know well how dearly Sakina loves me and I love her. To satisfy their vengeance against me, they might beat her up, to torment my soul, and, perhaps, lead her as a captive from the place where my dead body will lie. Zainab, do what you can to spare her these tortures and afflictions."

As Husain was saying this, each word was sinking into Zainab's wounded heart. She was choking with sobs and the only reply she could give to the last commendations of her brother was by nodding of her head.

After a few seconds, Husain continued: "Zainab, I have so much to say to you before my last parting but I have so little time for it. Dearest

sister, the enemy will take you all prisoners and they will, perhaps march you through the streets of Kufa and Damascus. They may snatch away your veils and parade you through the bazaars of these cities to add to your agony. They may even tie or chain your hands and feet and mercilessly use the lash and spears to torture you all helpless ladies and children of the Prophet's House. That will be the real hour of trial for you, but Zainab, I implore you by the love you have for me, not to lose your patience. When these tortures are inflicted on you all, you give courage to all the ladies and children with you, and ask them to pray to God Almighty for fortitude and patience to bear the ignominies, insults, tortures and torments. Zainab, remember at all times that we, people of the House of the Prophet, must stand firm in the hour of our trial without so much as uttering a curse on our torturers and tormentors."

When Husain stopped after saying this, Zainab looked at him through tears and replied in a low voice: "Husain, I promise you that I shall do exactly according to your last wishes. Dear brother, pray for me that God may give me the fortitude to suffer boldly and patiently, pray that in my hour of trial I may not be found wanting. My dearest Husain, I promise that I shall do exactly as you want me to and shall shoulder the responsibilities which your death will throw on me and show to the world that I am your sister, and daughter of Ali and Fatima, and grand-daughter of the Prophet of Islam."

This bold and brave reply of Zainab served as a balm to Husain's wounded heart. He blessed her and added: "Your sufferings will last a long time and you all will have to endure imprisonment and incarceration. When you return to Medina after your release from prison, convey my salaams to all my friends who may come to condole my death. Tell them that my last message to them was that I and my near and dear ones died without a drop of water with consuming thirst. Tell them that, when they drink cool water, they may remember me and my faithful followers and members of my family, and the thirst we endured today."

All the ladies of the family who were listening to the last wishes of Husain were beside themselves with grief. They were, one and all, crying bitterly. Some whose strength had ebbed away on account of thirst and starvation and the sufferings they had undergone at the loss of their

brothers and sons during the day, swooned and fell unconscious on the floor.

"I have not yet concluded what I have to tell you, Zainab," said Husain, after a while, "When you go back to Medina, you tell my beloved daughter, Fatima Sughra, that though I had left her behind on account of her ill-health, I never for a moment forgot her and remembered her till my last hour. Convey my love to her and tell her that fate willed it that our parting in Medina should be for ever. When she will learn from you that so many of her uncles, brothers and cousins left Medina but none returned, she will feel disconsolate. Do whatever you can to console her."

With these words Husain stopped. The brother and sister embraced each other. It was the last embrace of the loving brother and sister who had throughout their lives remained closest and most devoted to each other. It was the parting embrace of a brother and sister who knew that they were never to meet again. Zainab was clinging to Husain as if she did not want to let him go, knowing that he would never come back again. Both were crying their hearts out, the sister at the thought of the imminent martyrdom of her brother and the brother at the thought of the predicament in which he was leaving her and the others of his family, women and children—and his invalid son.

Time was now running out and this thought made Husain tear himself from his sister. He went over to each lady and each child and most affectionately and lovingly he bade them his last farewell. He turned to his aged nurse, Fizza, who had looked after him from his childhood, and kissing her hand he asked her to bless him as she had been blessing him since his childhood. To Fizza Husain was like a son. At the time of Fatima's death she had promised her to remain with him and never to leave him. To fulfil that promise she had accompanied him on this arduous journey, in spite of her advanced age, disregarding the advice of all the elderly ladies of Medina who had tried to dissuade her. This parting was tearing her heart to pieces. Her aged eyes were welling with tears as she hugged him and kissed his throat as she had seen his mother doing when he was a little boy. "Farewell, my son, farewell from your aged nurse. May God be with you in the hour of your supreme trial,"

she cried from the depth of her heart and with a shriek she fell down. Her grief-stricken aged heart could not bear this saddest parting.

Turning round Husain saw his dear little daughter standing near him and looking up at his face. She appeared to be speechless and dazed with grief. The sorrow depicted on her innocent face tore Husain's heart. He felt as if all the courage he could summon up would not be sufficient to steel his heart for this occasion and tell Sakina that he was leaving her for ever, leaving her to the mercies of the world that had no kindness for her, leaving her to face the woes which had no parallel, leaving her to a fate which had sufferings in store for her. He picked her up in his arms and imprinted kisses on her cheeks which were wet with tears. Ah! did he know that these same cheeks would receive cruel slaps of the enemy just for crying for her dead father!

Putting Sakina on the ground he hurried towards the tent where his son, Ali Zainal Abedeen was lying on a couch with raging fever. He found him almost unconscious on account of high fever. He bent over him and shook Ali Zainal Abedeen by his shoulder and said: "My son, I have come to bid farewell to you. Ali, my appointed hour is drawing close, so wake up and meet me for the last time."

Ali Zainal Abedeen was aroused from the stupor by these words of his father and he opened his eyes. He saw Husain for the first time that day and, such was the change brought about in him by the cruel blows inflicted on him during that eventful day, that for one moment he looked at him speechless and bewildered as if he could not recognise him. He saw his father's body with gaping wounds, his hair snow-white, his back bent. With supreme efforts he sat up on the bed and cried: "Oh God, what have the enemies done to my father!" Looking up at Husain he asked: "Father, what has happened to your faithful friends? What has happened to my uncle Abbas, my brother Ali Akbar, my cousins Qasim, Aun and Muhammad? How is it possible for you to be in this state, if any of them is alive to protect you?"

"My son," replied Husain with a sigh, "all of them have tasted martyrdom in defending me and the cause of Islam. There is no male member left in this camp except you and I. Now my turn has come to

go out and die fighting. My destiny is now beckoning me fast and I have come to bid adieu to you."

Hearing this Ali Zainal Abedeen mustered all the strength that was left in him and rose from his bed and said: "Father, so long as I am alive, you cannot go to meet your death. Let me die fighting as my brothers, cousins and uncles have done."

Husain gently put him on the bed and said: "My son, I command you, as your father and spiritual leader, to remain in bed. Your task is to accompany your aunts, mother and sisters and other ladies in captivity, to march through the streets of Kufa and Damascus, with hands and feet in chains, to suffer insults in the court of the tyrant and undergo imprisonment and to bear all these things with fortitude and patience. Your task is to show to the world that we can bear afflictions and sorrows with unfaltering faith in God and our cause. Your destiny has singled you out to demonstrate for all times that real crusade means showing faith in the hour of trial, when confronted with the most difficult and trying situations. What you will suffer, my son, will be far worse than death, for death would bring relief but you may have to live for years with memories of your cruellest sufferings."

With these words Husain clasped his son to his bosom. The father and son parted for ever. The grief was too much for Ali Zainal Abedeen to bear and he fell down on his couch unconscious. Merciful heaven spared him the agony of seeing his father's departure.

Husain felt that if he delayed his departure any longer, the enemy might rush into the camp en masse. This he could never suffer as he wanted to save his family from the ignominy of the enemy's looting and pillage so long as he was alive. When he reached the courtyard of his camp, he found his faithful steed waiting impatiently for him. Seeing him, the horse neighed with joy. This mount was Zuljanah, presented to him by his grandfather when he was a young boy and just learning to ride. The aged stallion seemed fully conscious of its master's plight. The sight of Husain, wounded and covered with blood, brought tears into the animal's eyes.

Husain stood before the horse for a moment looking hither and thither. Upto this time, there was not a single occasion when his brother Abbas or his son Ali Akbar, or his nephew Qasim, had not helped him to mount the horse holding the stirrups. Instinctively he looked all round him and exclaimed: "Brother Abbas, where are you? Why don't you rush forth to help me mount the horse? My Akbar, my Qasim why don't you come forward to hold the stirrups for me today?"

Zainab, who had come to the courtyard of the camp to see her brother depart, noticed the condition of her brother and realised what his feelings were. She rushed up to him and said: "Husain, if there is nobody to help you today, my brother, Zainab will do this service for you. Let me hold the stirrups for you." Before Husain could say anything, Zainab was holding the stirrups. Husain blessed her and jumped on the horse's back. He urged Zainab to go back into the tent and try to console all the ladies and children whose affections on that day knew no bounds. In deference to her brother's wishes, Zainab went back into the tent to perform the duties which, from that hour, had fallen to her lot.

As soon as Zainab had gone back into the tent, Husain spurred Zuljanah to move on. The horse did not respond and stood still as if it was glued to the spot. Husain was surprised at the horse's immobility. He knew that, with him, the horse had suffered wounds whilst going to the battlefield on every occasion a friend or member of the family fell fighting. He knew that, with him and members of his family, the horse had also gone without food and water for 3 days. Still Zuljanah's behaviour seemed inexplicable.

Addressing Zuljanah, Husain softly murmured into its ears: "My companion from childhood and my faithful charger, I know that you are old and weary, seeing and experiencing the events of today. But Zuljanah, this is the last time I am mounting you. Take me to the place where my destiny beckons me. Take me to my journey's end."

The horse appeared to understand what the Imam was saying. Though speechless, it indicated by, bending its head towards the ground, the reason why it had stood motionless. Looking down Husain saw his young daughter Sakina clinging to the horse's hoofs and softly moaning:

"Zuljanah, I implore you not to take away my father to the field of battle from which none of my dear ones has returned. Zuljanah, I saw my uncle Abbas ride away and I waited for him to come back with water, but my waiting proved to be in vain. Zuljanah, I know from the talk of my father that he is now going away, going for ever and ever, never to come back again. I beg of you not to take him out, if you do not want to see me as an orphan, with nobody left to love me and care for me."

Through lack of food and water and sheer exhaustion Sakina had become so weak that Husain could hear her moaning with great difficulty. She had come up to the horse so quietly that he had not noticed her till he looked down in response to the horse's indication by bending of its head. Now he knew why Zuljanah had stood still. He immediately jumped down from the horse's back, picked up Sakina in his arms and sat on the ground. The father and daughter clung to each other as if nothing could part them. Both were choked with sobs; both were crying their hearts out. When Husain could somewhat control his emotions, he softly said to Sakina: "My darling daughter, why did you rush out of the tent? My child, you must now remain with your mother and console her. You know, after the killing of Ali Asghar, how disconsolate your mother has become."

Sakina looked into the eyes of her father and innocently exclaimed: "Father, tell me, are you not going out for the last time, never to return? Are you not leaving your Sakina for ever? O' father, how will Sakina live without you? When you brought the dead body of my brother Ali Akbar, I thought that his loss would kill me; but then the thought that you were there to console us and be with us sustained me. When you informed me that my uncle Abbas had gone to heaven and that I would never see him, my heart sank within me; but you consoled me. Tell me father, when you are gone, who will be there to share our grief and sorrow, to speak to us a few words of consolation? With whom shall I be able to share my grief? No, father I will not let you go. You will never go—for Sakina's sake, you will not go." Saying this, Sakina wept. It was the weeping of a child, an innocent child that knew, in spite of her tender age, what death was; what the pangs of parting—eternal parting, brought about by death—were. She had experienced them, one after the other, on that fateful day.

Husain was stunned by the innocent pleadings of his Sakina whom he loved more than anything in this world. He knew very well what was in store for his beloved Sakina, whom he had brought up with love and affection which was unique. He remembered the day, during the journey to Karbala, when, on hearing the news of the death in Kufa of his emissary and cousin Muslim Ibne Aqil, he had called Muslim's young daughter, who was accompanying him, and, patting her with tender affection, had presented her a pair of earrings similar to the pair he had given to Sakina. At that time Sakina had whispered in his ears whether it was true that her cousin had lost her father, and her saying that, if she herself lost her father, she would not be able to live without him even for a day. Little did she know at that time that the day on which she would be orphaned would dawn so soon!

With supreme efforts Husain controlled his feelings and, kissing his beloved Sakina again and again, he said to her: "My own Sakina, my dearest child, how shall I explain to you that I must go out to meet my death, as others from our house have done. Child, you are too young to understand what is at stake. How can I explain to you that this day I am fighting the battle for the cause of truth and righteousness and I cannot sacrifice them for the sake of all that I hold dearest to my heart. Sakina, I can only tell you that life is transitory and all that is in existence in this world is to perish sooner or later. Child, by dying today, I am only going before you and you will follow me to heaven which is to be our eternal abode. My Sakina, God Almighty has so ordained that we must suffer the ordeals for the cause of truth. My child, do not hold me back but with a smile on your innocent lips, say goodbye to me."

As if her father's words had kindled some hope in her young heart, she said: "Father, you say that I will also join you in heaven after some time. Promise me, father, that it will be soon—very soon. Father, promise me that you will remember to plead with God to end my separation from you and to unite me with you in heaven, never to be parted again. If you will promise me, father, I shall let you go." Before Husain could reply to her, she added: "And father, I want you to make me one more promise. When I will not see you, I will find the world and life nothing but misery. Though in death you will not be able to see me in person,

promise that you will come to me in my dreams so that I will be able to unburden my heart to you and tell you how I suffered without you. If you will promise me, father, at least I shall have something to look forward to every day. I shall wait for the night to come so that, in my dream, I can talk to you, as I have always done; to kiss you and cling to you as I have done every day." With these words she clung to her father with a choking heart.

Husain's heart was bleeding and the innocent words of Sakina made him weep as he had seldom done in the course of the tragedies he had suffered that day, one after another. He burst out crying and the father and daughter sat there embracing each other—both crying their hearts out with grief unconfined.

Realising that time was now running out and hearing the cries from the enemy's army, calling him to the battle-field, Husain, with the utmost effort, controlled himself. Kissing Sakina again and again, he said, "My Sakina, my beloved child, I promise you what you are asking for. My darling, you also promise me that you will bear all the sufferings and all the tortures that the enemy will subject you to with courage and fortitude. And Sakina, remember that if you will cry for me too much, your aunt Zainab, who has already suffered so much and who will now be shouldering all the responsibilities after me, will be crushed by your sorrows and weeping."

Sakina murmured softly: "Father, Sakina promises you to face all the sufferings and afflictions silently. My beloved father, I shall do exactly as you want me to." As if she had remembered something, she softly added: "Father, every night I used to come to you and sleep on your chest. Now that will no more be possible. How I wish I could sleep on your chest for the last time so that I could carry its memories for the rest of my life."

Husain could not find any words to reply to this innocent request. He slept flat on the burning sands of the courtyard and clasped his daughter. Sakina rested her head on her father's chest and lay there crying silently for quite some time. The sobs of Sakina and Husain were punctuating the silence that pervaded the camp. Silently Sakina rose from the

Imam's chest, kissed him goodbye and stood near the horse. She saw him mounting the horse and riding away, with a last affectionate glance at her that expressed his deepest love for her. She raised her small hand and reverentially bowed in salutation to him—for the last time.

Seeing her father march out for the last time, Sakina returned to her mother, Umme Rabab, and rushed into her extended arms. With her head resting on her mother's bosom, she was weeping and her mother was caressing her and stroking her head tenderly. Umme Rabab was so much stunned by the magnitude of her grief that she had become speechless.

Zainab heard her brother riding out of the camp. She could not contain herself and raising the curtain from the door of the tent, she followed him with her eyes.

Imam Husain rode on straight to the armies arrayed against him on the opposite side. The soldiers of Amr Saad saw Husain coming towards them clad in the Prophet's turban and robe. Facing the army, he addressed in a stentorian, clear and ringing voice which was audible to the enemy hordes: "O soldiers of Yazid, I have come to ask you whether you know who I am. If any of you do not know me, I make it clear that I am the grandson of Prophet Mohammad, whom you acknowledge as the Prophet of Islam. I am the son of the Prophet's daughter Fatima and the Prophet's cousin Ali. I am the last of the five persons about whom the Prophet of Islam spoke time and again to his people. Many of you have seen and heard the Prophet. I ask such of you whether you have not seen the Prophet carrying me, and my brother Hasan, on his shoulders, when we were young children. Have you not heard the Prophet say that I was his beloved child? Have you not seen the Prophet crying with grief when I cried on account of any sorrow or affliction? The Prophet is no more, but I am here before you. You have wounded my heart by mercilessly killing my sons, my brothers, my nephews and my faithful friends, each one of whom was as dear to me as my kith and kin. You have not spared my innocent Ali Asghar, who was too young to cause you any harm. Each one of them has been killed by you, hungry and thirsty. You have denied me and my family even food and water, knowing well that the scorching heat of this plain is multiplying manifold

our agonies and sufferings. I ask you, in the name of God and His Prophet, what have I done to deserve this treatment?"

With these words Husain paused for a while to get a reply to his question. Amr Saad, Commander of Yazid's army, replied saying: "Husain, there was no need for you to say what you have said, because we are not going to relent a bit. We have given the choice to you to accept Yazid as your spiritual lord and master, and subject yourself to his rulings and decrees in all matters, spiritual and temporal, recognising him as the Leader of the Faithful and successor of the Prophet. If you want to save your life, and save your family from the sufferings which await them, you surrender to our demand. There is no other choice before you."

Husain heard this reply silently and said: "Amr Saad, your father was a companion of the Prophet and, of all the people, you were a witness to all that I have mentioned, because you were very often accompanying your father when he used to visit the Prophet. Do you expect me, for a moment, to accept Yazid, who is, to your knowledge, a debauch and a profligate, as the spiritual leader of the faithful and rightful successor of the Prophet? Do you expect me to accept all the distortions and changes that he wants to introduce in the tenets of Islam and be a silent spectator just to save my life and to stop the brutal treatment you plan to mete out to my children and ladies? Let me dispel any doubt that you may be entertaining and make it clear to you that, if you want me to compromise my principles for the sake of worldly gains, I shall never do it. If you want to offer me the choice between honour and death, I shall prefer death. If sacrifice of Islamic principles and Quranic teachings is the price you are demanding for my life and the honour of my family, I am here and now rejecting your offer. I am asking you, in the name of Islam, to tell me whether I have, even in a single instance, acted contrary to the principles of religion? Have I done anything to justify the torments you are inflicting on me? O' ye who claim to be the followers of the Prophet, do not smear your hands with my blood for, on the day of reckoning, you will have to face my grandfather and my mother who will ask each of you why you shed my blood knowing that I was innocent; knowing that I had not done any harm to any of you. O' soldiers of Kufa and Damascus, what I have suffered at your hands during the day is enough to kill me, even if you desist from slaughtering me. I appeal to you to think, for God's sake, what

you have done and what you are bent upon doing. Even now it is not too late for you to repent. Despite all that you have done, I shall not curse you, for it is the tradition of the Prophet's house to pray for enlightenment of those who torture and torment us; to pray for the forgiveness of those who sincerely repent and who, through contrition, change their future life".

Husain's speech was most eloquent, reminding those who were hearing him of the eloquence of his father when he used to mount the pulpit and address the congregation in the Mosque at Kufa. However, the greed of the mercenaries had complete sway over their hearts and minds. They were thinking that their task was almost accomplished and they would become eligible for the extravagant rewards which they had been promised, if they brought the heads of Husain and his followers to Yazid's court.

Amr Saad noted with satisfaction that his soldiers were still thinking in terms of worldly gains, rather than rewards and retributions of the other world. He saw that they were not prepared to heed the rumbling of a distant drum. This emboldened him and he replied back to the Imam: "Husain, we have heard enough from you. You have not accepted the one and only condition we want you to fulfil, that is, explicit allegiance to Yazid as the spiritual mentor with final authority to him to do what he wants in all religious matters. Since you are not accepting this, you will be beheaded, say what you will. We know that, against the overwhelming odds, you have not the least chance but still you are trying to gain time. In your present plight, even the weakest of my soldiers would be more than a match for you, what to talk of the whole army I have got under my command."

These taunting words aroused Husain's wrath. His Hashimite blood was now boiling at the insulting words uttered by Amr Saad. After all he was the son of Ali, the Lion of God, whose victories had become known throughout the length and breadth of Arabia. Had not Ali scattered vast armies of infidels single-handed and saved the day of Islam against overwhelming odds? His ire was aroused and he wanted to show these hirelings and stooges of Yazid that if he wanted, he could give them a taste of his sword, even in that condition.

Trembling with rage, Husain put his hand on his scabbard and unsheathed his sword, which he had inherited from his father. Like a lion he roared: "Amr Saad, I accept your challenge and offer single combat to the bravest of the brave in your army. Nay, not one but as many as you want to send to fight me, one after the other."

The cowardly Commander of Yazid's forces and his equally pusillanimous soldiers were shaken by Husain's words. They recalled how Ali, father of Husain, had dealt with the best warriors of his opponents' armies in the different battles fought by him. None had the courage to accept the gauntlet thrown by Husain and go out for single combat with him.

After hurried consultations with his officers, Amr Saad gave orders to fire a volley of arrows at Husain. He also gave orders to his infantry and cavalry to converge on Husain with swords, scimitars and daggers. Husain, with sword in hand, charged on the attacking soldiers mowing down all who came within the range of his sword. A confusion arose in the enemy ranks, because all the soldiers of Yazid's army were clashing with one another whilst Husain was charging and cutting through their ranks. He first attacked the right wing of the army and the enemy soldiers in utter confusion fell back. He veered round and launched a furious attack on the left wing of the army and, before the soldiers could realise where he was, he had cut through the core of that wing. He then turned like lightning to the centre of the army and the cowardly soldiers, who were anxious to save their lives to get the benefit of the awards for which they had sold their souls, retreated in panic and confusion. Husain's sword was flashing in the blazing sun like lightning. So swift were his movements and so well-trained for battle was his charger that with incredible speed he was able to scatter and mow down the opposing soldiers. The confusion was becoming worse confounded in Yazid's army, because his soldiers who were charging forward, were finding themselves clashing with each other. For a moment in utter panic the soldiers felt as if Ali, the father of Husain, had descended from heaven to fight and defeat the whole army of Yazid. Some of the soldiers were awestruck by the battle prowess shown by Husain, this aged Husain, who had no food and water for 3 days, whose heart was torn by the loss of all his dearest ones and every inch of whose body was covered with wounds. They could not help exclaiming spontaneously their admiration for the bravest fight he was put-

ting up in the face of heaviest odds any warrior had faced in the history of the world. The more cowardly amongst them were piteously appealing to him to spare them—to spare their contemptible lives.

The army that had tried to converge on Husain was now scattered and in full retreat. He halted in his charge to see that the way to the rivulet, the tributary of the Furat, was now clear. He saw the dead body of Abbas lying there. Instinctively he exclaimed: "Abbas, did you see your brother's last fight? My brother, in life you were always ready with praise for any brave deed. Why don't you say 'bravo' to me?"

Husain looked at the sky and saw that the sun was now declining. He realised that it was time for the evening prayers. He thought that, as the soldiers had fallen back, he could use the respite to offer his evening prayers. With this thought he put back his sword in the scabbard.

Amr Saad and his soldiers, who were now watching Husain from a distance and conferring amongst themselves about their next move, were surprised to see Husain sheath his sword. Some one said that it was a golden opportunity to attack Husain but none had the courage to march towards him after testing his skill with the sword. Amr Saad ordered his archers to fire volley after volley of arrows, his infantry to hurl stones and missiles at him from a distance. He asked some of them to catapult stones and burning coals at him. The orders were executed without a moment's loss.

Husain, who was already wounded from head to foot, was now receiving one mortal wound after another in quick succession. His blood was flowing so fast that he was finding it difficult to remain on horseback. Dizziness was now overpowering him. He knew that his fight was now over. He felt that his sister Zainab might be near the tent watching him. He wanted to spare her the sight of his death. Putting his arms round his horse's neck he said: "Zuljanah, take me to a low lying area from where I may not be visible to my family in the camp."

Such was Zuljanah's understanding of his master's wishes that he immediately bolted, carrying Husain to a place which was in a trough. Knowing that Husain was now semi-conscious and not in a position to dismount, it spread out its front legs so that Husain may not fall heavily



on the ground but slip easily on to it. Zuljanah was accustomed to this when it used to carry Husain as a child, when he was too young to dismount. Husain managed to slide down from the horseback to the burning ground beneath; but for a few moments his body remained suspended on the spikes of the arrows that had pierced his body from top to toe. He immediately lost his consciousness.

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From the camp's exit Zainab was watching her brother's last battle, lost in admiration at the brave fight put up by him. She had seen him scattering the enemy's hordes, then halting in his march and finally, the horse riding away very fast to a place from where she could not see him. In a veil covering her from head to foot she rushed out towards a hillock near the camp so that she could have a full view of the battlefield. From this hillock, known ever since as "Zainab's Hillock," she saw her brother lying unconscious on the burning sands and Zuljanah standing guard over him with its head bowed. She was at a loss to understand what was happening there.

Husain was now in a semi-conscious state. In this condition he felt that all the prophets of the bygone ages had come over to witness his ordeals—Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus, and all the other prophets of yore. He saw them retreating one by one, saying to one another that they could not bear to see his helpless and saddest plight. He saw his own grand-father Prophet Mohammad, his father Ali, and his brother Hasan, weeping at his helpless condition. He heard them also say to each other, that they too could not see his suffering and agonies, and leave with limitless grief and sorrow. Then in his sub-conscious state he saw Fatima his mother come over weeping and wailing, and saying: "My Husain, what they have done to you. My child, none of them had any pity for you! Did no one amongst them recognise that you were the Prophet's dearest child? My Husain, there is nobody to be near you in your last hour, but, my child, I am here to be with you. I will not let your head lie on the burning sands of Karbala. I will hold it in my lap, till the last."

He felt as if she had come near him and put her tender hand on his forehead, much as she used to do during his childhood. On his burning forehead he felt something cool and comforting—he thought it was his mother's hand wiping the blood and sweat from his forehead.

His senses revived at this sensation and he opened his eyes. He saw the sun directly over him and his horse trying in vain to protect him from its blazing rays. The realisation dawned on him that he had stopped the fight, so that he could finish his evening prayers. He felt that unless he hurried with it, the enemy may not give him time to complete it. There was no water available anywhere for ablution so he cleansed his hands and face with the burning sands of the desert and began his prayers. He finished them and with his head prostrated in prayers, he addressed his Maker: "My Allah, Thou art my Witness that I have fulfilled my mission in life without any hesitation, without squirming, without faltering, without complaining... My Lord and Lord of the Universe, I submit unreservedly to Thy Decree and resign myself to Thy Dispensation."

Whilst he was still offering his prayers, Amr Saad called upon his warriors to cut off Husain's head. They were so cowardly and scared after having tasted his sword that none could muster enough courage to go near him and carry out the Commander's orders. They were willing to wound but afraid to strike. Even Amr Saad's coaxing and cajoling could not instil sufficient courage in them to venture near him. Amr Saad then asked Shimr to go forth and behead Husain whilst he was still engaged in prayers. He offered him highest rewards and, to give him heart, he even offered to accompany him and stand by him, sword in hand. The two then marched towards the place where Husain was lying, his head still prostrated in prayers, his lips uttering prayers to the Almighty God of the universe.

When the two of them reached the spot, they heard murmurs from Husain's lips. Shimr thought that he might be cursing those who had done everything to exterminate his family and friends, who had so brutally and mercilessly treated him. He bent over the Imam's prostrated body to hear what he was saying, when he caught these words: "O Allah, I beseech Thee with all humility to forgive the trespasses of the erring ones for Thou art the Most Beneficent, the Most Forgiving."

Seeing that Husain had concluded his prayers and fearing that he might get up to defend himself with whatever strength was left in him, Shimr decided to hurry up with his most dastardly act. He mounted on Husain's back and, with the sword he was carrying, he prepared

himself to cut off Husain's head. Husain, who was now too weak with the loss of blood to raise his head, turned a little and saw what Shimr was about to do. In a faltering voice, which was audible to Shimr, he said: "O Shirm, I am thirsty. I am thirsty. O Shimr, give me a few drops of water before you accomplish your task."

Zainab, who was watching the events as they were happening before her, saw Amr Saad and Shimr reaching the place where her brother lay. She saw Shimr mount her brother's back with sword in hand. In sheer desperation, as a last attempt to save her brother's life, she rushed forth, her hood trailing behind her. She reached the place where Husain lay and going before Amr Saad, she said: "O Amr Saad, I appeal to you as the grand-daughter of the Prophet of Islam, to save my brother's life." He turned his face away from her and so she went over to the other side and said: "O son of Saad Bin Abi Wakkas, will you stand here and watch my brother being slaughtered so mercilessly without a drop of water? In the name of God, I appeal to you to save Husain's life." He still remained silent as if he was completely oblivious to her pleadings and appeals.

All this was seen by Husain and, great as his agonies and pains were, he could not bear to see his sister being humiliated by the utter disdain of Amr Saad. He also knew what his sister would feel if his head were to be severed in her full view. Mustering all the strength that was left in him, he raised his voice and said to Zainab: "My sister, I appeal to you to return to the camp immediately. For the sake of the love you bear for me, hasten to the tent. It will give greatest pain to me if you remain here any longer."

Zainab rushed back to the camp weeping copiously and lamenting. On reaching the camp she rushed to the tent where her nephew was lying on his sick bed. She shook him up and told him what she had beheld a moment earlier. Supporting him she brought him to the exist of the camp. Both of them stood there silent and speechless. They felt that nature itself was sharing their grief, because a strong gust of wind arose and carried with it the red particles of burning desert sand. It ruffled up the waters of the Furat and an angry murmur arose from the torrents that were flowing by. In the distant, dusty panorama they saw a spear with Husain's head on it. They heard the drums of Yazid's army proclaiming

the end of the battle. Zainab with a shriek wailed: "O my brother Husain, my brother Husain! At last they have killed you, they have beheaded you without a drop of water." With these words she fell unconscious into the arms of her nephew. He gently put her down on the floor and, prostrating his head on the ground, exclaimed: "O God, we mortals resign ourselves to Thy will. From Thee we have come and Unto Thee shall be our return."

promise that you will come to me in my dreams so that I will be able to unburden my heart to you and tell you how I suffered without you. If you will promise me, father, at least I shall have something to look forward to every day. I shall wait for the night to come so that, in my dream, I can talk to you, as I have always done; to kiss you and cling to you as I have done every day." With these words she clung to her father with a choking heart.

Husain's heart was bleeding and the innocent words of Sakina made him weep as he had seldom done in the course of the tragedies he had suffered that day, one after another. He burst out crying and the father and daughter sat there embracing each other—both crying their hearts out with grief unconfined.

Realising that time was now running out and hearing the cries from the enemy's army, calling him to the battle-field, Husain, with the utmost effort, controlled himself. Kissing Sakina again and again, he said; "My Sakina, my beloved child, I promise you what you are asking for. My darling, you also promise me that you will bear all the sufferings, all the tortures that the enemy will subject you to with courage and fortitude. And Sakina, remember that if you will cry for me too much, your aunt Zainab, who has already suffered so much and who will now be shouldering all the responsibilities after me, will be crushed by your sorrows and weeping."

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Husain could not find any words to reply to this innocent request. He slept flat on the burning sands of the courtyard and clasped his daughter. Sakina rested her head on her father's chest and lay there crying silently for quite some time. The sobs of Sakina and Husain were punctuating the silence that pervaded the camp. Silently Sakina rose from the

Imam's chest, kissed him goodbye and stood near the horse. She saw him mounting the horse and riding away, with a last affectionate glance at her that expressed his deepest love for her. She raised her small hand and reverentially bowed in salutation to him—for the last time.

Seeing her father march out for the last time, Sakina returned to her mother, Umme Rabab, and rushed into her extended arms. With her head resting on her mother's bosom, she was weeping and her mother was caressing her and stroking her head tenderly. Umme Rabab was so much stunned by the magnitude of her grief that she had become speechless.

Zainab heard her brother riding out of the camp. She could not contain herself and raising the curtain from the door of the tent, she followed him with her eyes.

Imam Husain rode on straight to the armies arrayed against him on the opposite side. The soldiers of Amr Saad saw Husain coming towards them clad in the Prophet's turban and robe. Facing the army, he addressed in a stentorian, clear and ringing voice which was audible to the enemy hordes: "O soldiers of Yazid, I have come to ask you whether you know who I am. If any of you do not know me, I make it clear that I am the grandson of Prophet Mohammad, whom you acknowledge as the Prophet of Islam. I am the son of the Prophet's daughter Fatima and the Prophet's cousin Ali. I am the last of the five persons about whom the Prophet of Islam spoke time and again to his people. Many of you have seen and heard the Prophet. I ask such of you whether you have not seen the Prophet carrying me, and my brother Hasan, on his shoulders, when we were young children. Have you not heard the Prophet say that I was his beloved child? Have you not seen the Prophet crying with grief when I cried on account of any sorrow or affliction? The Prophet is no more, but I am here before you. You have wounded my heart by mercilessly killing my sons, my brothers, my nephews and my faithful friends, each one of whom was as dear to me as my kith and kin. You have not spared my innocent Ali Asghar, who was too young to cause you any harm. Each one of them has been killed by you, hungry and thirsty. You have denied me and my family even food and water, knowing well that the scorching heat of this plain is multiplying manifold

our agonies and sufferings. I ask you, in the name of God and His Prophet, what have I done to deserve this treatment?"

With these words Husain paused for a while to get a reply to his question. Amr Saad, Commander of Yazid's army, replied saying: "Husain, there was no need for you to say what you have said, because we are not going to relent a bit. We have given the choice to you to accept Yazid as your spiritual lord and master, and subject yourself to his rulings and decrees in all matters, spiritual and temporal, recognising him as the Leader of the Faithful and successor of the Prophet. If you want to save your life, and save your family from the sufferings which await them, you surrender to our demand. There is no other choice before you."

Husain heard this reply silently and said: "Amr Saad, your father was a companion of the Prophet and, of all the people, you were a witness to all that I have mentioned, because you were very often accompanying your father when he used to visit the Prophet. Do you expect me, for a moment, to accept Yazid, who is, to your knowledge, a debauch and a profligate, as the spiritual leader of the faithful and rightful successor of the Prophet? Do you expect me to accept all the distortions and changes that he wants to introduce in the tenets of Islam and be a silent spectator just to save my life and to stop the brutal treatment you plan to mete out to my children and ladies? Let me dispel any doubt that you may be entertaining and make it clear to you that, if you want me to compromise my principles for the sake of worldly gains, I shall never do it. If you want to offer me the choice between honour and death, I shall prefer death. If sacrifice of Islamic principles and Quranic teachings is the price you are demanding for my life and the honour of my family, I am here and now rejecting your offer. I am asking you, in the name of Islam, to tell me whether I have, even in a single instance, acted contrary to the principles of religion? Have I done anything to justify the torments you are inflicting on me? O' ye who claim to be the followers of the Prophet, do not smear your hands with my blood for, on the day of reckoning, you will have to face my grandfather and my mother who will ask each of you why you shed my blood knowing that I was innocent; knowing that I had not done any harm to any of you. O' soldiers of Kufa and Damascus, what I have suffered at your hands during the day is enough to kill me, even if you desist from slaughtering me. I appeal to you to think, for God's sake, what

you have done and what you are bent upon doing. Even now it is not too late for you to repent. Despite all that you have done, I shall not curse you, for it is the tradition of the Prophet's house to pray for enlightenment of those who torture and torment us; to pray for the forgiveness of those who sincerely repent and who, through contrition, change their future life".

Husain's speech was most eloquent, reminding those who were hearing him of the eloquence of his father when he used to mount the pulpit and address the congregation in the Mosque at Kufa. However, the greed of the mercenaries had complete sway over their hearts and minds. They were thinking that their task was almost accomplished and they would become eligible for the extravagant rewards which they had been promised, if they brought the heads of Husain and his followers to Yazid's court.

Amr Saad noted with satisfaction that his soldiers were still thinking in terms of worldly gains, rather than rewards and retributions of the other world. He saw that they were not prepared to heed the rumbling of a distant drum. This emboldened him and he replied back to the Imam: "Husain, we have heard enough from you. You have not accepted the one and only condition we want you to fulfil, that is, explicit allegiance to Yazid as the spiritual mentor with final authority to him to do what he wants in all religious matters. Since you are not accepting this, you will be beheaded, say what you will. We know that, against the overwhelming odds, you have not the least chance but still you are trying to gain time. In your present plight, even the weakest of my soldiers would be more than a match for you, what to talk of the whole army I have got under my command."

These taunting words aroused Husain's wrath. His Hashimite blood was now boiling at the insulting words uttered by Amr Saad. After all he was the son of Ali, the Lion of God, whose victories had become known throughout the length and breadth of Arabia. Had not Ali scattered vast armies of infidels single-handed and saved the day of Islam against overwhelming odds? His ire was aroused and he wanted to show these hirelings and stooges of Yazid that if he wanted, he could give them a taste of his sword, even in that condition.